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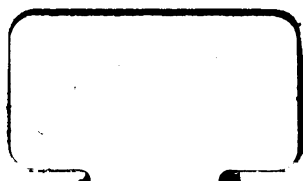
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Mrs. Phillis Reynolds

10



THE JUDGMENT OF CHARIS

MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

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Reynolds

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By MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

**THE JUDGMENT OF CHARIS
ALSO RAN
"OPEN, SESAME!"
THE KING'S WIDOW
THE LONELY STRONGHOLD
A CASTLE TO LET
THE DAUGHTER PAYS
THE COST OF A PROMISE
A DOUBTFUL CHARACTER
A MAKE-SHIFT MARRIAGE
OUT OF THE
GIRL FROM NOWHERE
THE NOTORIOUS MISS LISLE**

**NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY**

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THE JUDGMENT OF CHARIS

BY

MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

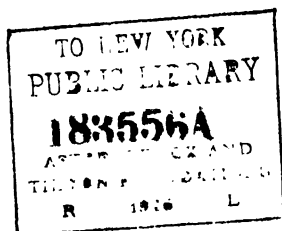
AUTHOR OF "THE KING'S WIDOW," "THE DAUGHTER
PAYS," "THE LONELY STRONGHOLD,"
"A CASTLE TO LET," ETC.



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THE JUDGMENT OF CHARIS. I

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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THE JUDGMENT OF CHARIS

CHAPTER I

LADY PORTWINE'S LAP-DOG

AS the lift shot noiselessly down to the ground-floor of the Tuscany Hotel, a middle-aged man stepped out of it and walked towards the entrance lounge.

He was well dressed, but had the air of one who has known hard work and discipline. His face was rather a fine one, oval in shape, dark in complexion. His iron-grey hair gave a touch of distinction to his clean-cut features, and to the lines upon his countenance, graven there by some deep-lying trouble.

Beckoning one of the page-boys, he bade him watch for the arrival of an elderly lady and gentleman of the name of Cranstoun-Brown, and to conduct them to him in the drawing-room. The voice in which the order was given was pleasant, but carried the hint of an accent.

As he turned away to go to the drawing-room, a newsboy came through the swing-door. Summon-

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ing him, the gentleman bought a *Spectator* and turned aside to glance at it, seating himself upon one of the couches which stood about.

A large, important-looking female was descending the main staircase. She was accompanied by a small Pekingese dog upon a lead, which lead terminated in a bracelet secured to the owner's wrist.

Swiftly behind her came a thin, active girl who carried an attaché case, and ran downstairs as though she had a train to catch. Coming within sight of the hall clock, she hastened yet the more, seeing neither the plethoric little dog nor the link between him and the ponderous lady. She caught her foot, there was a mingled cry, yelp and shriek, and the girl fell the whole length of the stairs, alighting almost at the feet of the man with the *Spectator*.

He was prompt in hurrying to the rescue. The hall became full of excited people running about. The bulky owner of the dog had most wisely seated herself when the shock came. Its impact broke her bracelet, and the little cur was hurled, like the girl, to the bottom of the stairs. Lady Portwine made such outcry that at first she was thought to be herself injured. Moreover, she was covered with furs and diamonds, and looked important. The girl was evidently nobody. She wore a blue serge suit and a little hat to match.

For obvious reasons, therefore, more than one voice was heard indignantly to declare that the accident had been the girl's fault entirely. The man with the iron-grey hair had meanwhile lifted her

carefully from the ground. She was not unconscious, but breathless and bewildered.

"Oh!" she cried, as he placed her upon the lounge. "What on earth have I done? What happened?"

"Never mind," said the kind voice with the accent. "What matters is the extent of your hurt. May I take off your hat?"

He did so, deftly. The clerk, who had left his desk to investigate the affair, seeing that she was sitting up and speaking, turned to the more important matter of Lady Portwine's outraged feelings and the extent of her pedigree dog's injuries. She and Sir Jacob had occupied an expensive suite at the Tuscany ever since their phenomenal rise of fortune owing to a deal with the Government in South American carcasses during the war. She was obviously to be conciliated; and for some minutes George Strachan had the monopoly of the person who was really hurt.

The girl was trying to laugh, though shivering and gasping. The hat had saved her head from anything worse than a purple bump which was rapidly rising under the loose rings of shining hair upon her forehead. But when she attempted to raise her arms in the instinctive feminine desire to arrange her head-gear, she uttered a cry of pain.

"My arm!" she muttered, "my left arm! I'm afraid it's sprained, or something. How perfectly sickening! I'm a typist, as it happens, and I have to type a dozen folios by four o'clock."

Strachan was interested. There was a spon-

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taneity about that phrase, "How perfectly sickening!" which enlisted his sympathy.

"Most annoying," said he. "You certainly can't use that arm. Look how your wrist is swelling! I had better take you to a doctor and get it bound up."

Her lips twisted a little as she nursed the injured limb.

"Don't you trouble," said she, between half-shut teeth. "Not so bad as a leg would have been. I can walk—in a minute. Then I'll go and . . . find a doctor."

"No such thing," said he, with kind authority. "Certain to be a doctor somewhere about in this hotel. Lie back a while and get your breath while I say a word to the authorities."

The management, convinced of two things—first that the girl was really hurt, and next that Mr. Strachan was showing interest in her case—became suddenly attentive. She was taken into a private room, a glass of water was brought, and the doctor, who had already rendered first aid to Fido, discovered that he was at leisure to attend to her wrist. While he was doing this, Mr. Strachan was advised of the arrival of his guests, and went out into the hall to receive them.

Strachan had been looking forward to this meeting with almost painful expectation. His immediate feeling was disappointment. He saw a stout, elderly couple, elaborately got up for the occasion. The lady was large. She wore purple silk and expensive

furs. She had small eyes and a heavy jowl. Her husband beside her conveyed the impression of being almost as unimportant as the male spider is in comparison with the female. He seemed sheltering behind the expansiveness with which his wife grasped her cousin's hand in two fat yellow-gloved paws.

"Why, George—George Strachan! After all these years! Back in England! We could hardly believe it when we got your letter—could we, Pa? Well, what a pleasure! Have you come home to stay?"

Strachan's soft dark eyes were wistful as he contemplated his cousin Clara. It could be seen that he was anxious to like his kinswoman—to think well of her if he could.

"I can't answer your question yet," he said gravely. "The old country has changed since I left it—one has dropped out——"

"Of course," stammered Mr. Cranstoun-Brown solicitously, "we realise how the painful circumstances must—must—we understand full well that such bereavement——"

George Strachan could not bear so heavy a touch upon wounds as yet but half healed. His brow contracted, but he replied quite pleasantly:

"We can talk of such things by and by. Just now I want to ask if you will mind waiting five minutes or so before sitting down to lunch? There has just been an accident here—a young lady fell downstairs—over the string of one of those detestable little lap-curs—and has hurt herself a good deal. I want

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to persuade her, as soon as she feels well enough, to come and eat something with us."

"A young lady!" cried Clara Brown, in a tone which Strachan found distasteful. Cranstoun-Brown was wiser than his wife—perhaps merely because he was kinder.

"Fell down these stairs, you say?" he echoed, with some assumption of interest. "A pretty severe fall, that. Who is she?"

"That I don't know, as yet," was the reply, "except that her name is Garth and she is a professional typist. If you and Clara will excuse me a moment, I will go and see what the doctor thinks of her."

He saw them comfortably seated and went back to the room he had left.

The doctor had finished his work and departed. The girl was lying back in a large chair which she did not nearly fill. Her face was wan and her eyes closed; but at sound of the opening door she unclosed them and summoned a smile, which struck him as infinitely pathetic. He found her extraordinarily attractive, though he could hardly say that she was pretty. Her skin was fine, her features, though not regular, were delicately cut, and her mouth was much tucked in at the corners, disclosing dear little teeth when her smile broke out. She was entirely free from affectation, and answered his questions naturally.

"Well," said he presently, "I guess you feel ready for a mouthful of lunch?"

"Thanks. I'll go over the road to a teashop in a

minute or two. I have to find a friend to do my work for me."

"Leave that to me. I will send your notes to be copied, while you are having lunch here."

She smiled. "You are most kind, but that's preposterous. I should need to have my lunch cut up for me."

"I shall be here to cut it up," said Strachan simply.

She laughed. "A bun doesn't need cutting up. Do you think I usually lunch on rump steak?"

"You don't look like it, but I have no idea what people eat in England since the war. I've only been back a week from Canada."

"Canada!" she cried, on a note almost of triumph, adding, as he looked interrogative, "I knew you were different, somehow."

"Different?"

As she opened her mouth to reply, the door opened and a young woman in a very smart black silk frock sailed in. She glanced from the lady's bandaged wrist to the gentleman as if puzzled, but concluded that she had better deliver her message.

"Lady Portwine wishes me to ask how the—*the young person* is, and to tell her that Her Ladyship does not intend to—to take any steps—any proceedings, I should say."

Strachan was watching the little face whose outline gleamed so purely against the dim velvet background of the easy chair. He marked how the dimples quivered about the corners of the tucked-in

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mouth. The airs and graces of the lady's maid were evidently almost too much for Miss Garth's self-control. He turned to the waiting messenger.

"Do I gather that Lady Portwine maintains that the accident was—er—this young lady's fault?"

The maid looked taken aback. "She was running downstairs at a great rate," she murmured.

"On the other hand," went on Mr. Strachan, "it is not a wise thing to walk up and down a public staircase with a very small animal on a lead. Miss Garth has been hurt, and her injuries will interfere with her professional duties. I witnessed the accident, and I do not think the courts would hold Miss Garth to have been in fault."

The maid's expression revealed that the same idea had been put before Her Ladyship.

"Do I understand that the young—lady—thinks she has any cause for complaint, sir?"

Perhaps it was the highly effective pause before the maid brought out the word "lady" which caused Miss Garth to break into laughter.

"Of course not. It was half my fault," she said impetuously, and added mischievously, "I hope the little rat was not hurt."

"You are the only person who was hurt, I conjecture," said Strachan. To his sensitive perceptions the girl's demeanour suggested that she herself had been used to command the services of a maid, and that the attitude of this one tickled her hugely. A pang of sympathy shot through him. Was this a

specimen of what Punch laughingly refers to as "the new poor"?

Evidently the maid was a little alarmed by the impressive manner of Strachan's declaration that he had been a witness of the accident. She lost some of her arrogance, and stammered out that she was bidden to say that Her Ladyship would like to compensate the young lady for her loss of time and the doctor's services.

At this, Miss Garth, with a muttered exclamation of "What cheek!" came to her feet. Mr. Strachan, without hesitation, stepped in front of her.

"Miss Garth's hand is so injured that she cannot use a typewriter, and so is unable to execute the commission on which she was engaged when she fell downstairs. She must pay a substitute to do her work——"

The maid promptly produced some Treasury notes, and having thrust them into his hand, muttered that she would report to Her Ladyship that the young—er—lady was satisfied, and hurried out of the room. Strachan was conscious that a very irate young woman was standing just behind him.

"Well, upon my word," she began indignantly, but burst once more into laughter as he turned and faced her with an irresistible twist of the mouth.

"I take too much upon myself, you were about to say. That's nonsense. Am I wrong in concluding that you work for your living?"

"Certainly I work for my living."

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"Then you can't afford to lose work?"

"N—no."

"Why shouldn't this woman, bursting with money to waste on lap-dogs and kindred follies, help you when, partly at least by her fault, you have been crippled? I suppose you know that hand won't be serviceable for some while yet?"

She admitted it grudgingly.

"Yet you are too proud to accept this little bit of compensation?"

His voice and manner as he handed over the money made it impossible to take offence. He had a hint of the American "vurry," and for "*can't*" he said neither "*carn't*" nor "*can't*," but "*caan't*," which was somehow fascinating.

"And now for lunch," he went on calmly, having silenced her objections. "I have a most efficient chaperon outside there in the hall, and I hope you'll honour me by being my guest. Where are those documents of yours? While we eat, I'll send a messenger to the nearest bureau to get them done."

"You are the most domineering person," she smiled, her lovely eyes full of gratitude, "but indeed I can't. I don't feel anything like well enough to lunch in a restaurant. I must have a taxi and go home. Please find me one, and I'll depart, blessing your name—which I don't know."

"It's Strachan," he answered, "George Strachan. I guess I'll have to let you take your way. Sit down there, and I'll find a taxi and call you." Cutting short her protestations, he shut the door upon her

and went up to his two lunchless relatives, seated in the drawing-room.

"Clara," said he, "I want that you and Joe should go right into the restaurant and begin your lunch. That girl's not fit to go home alone, and I must take her. Follow me—I'll give you in charge of one of the best waiters in London, and I'll be with you again before you've got to the joint."

Disregarding their protests and suggestions, he swept them both off, saw them comfortably settled at the reserved table, and hastened back to his charge.

CHAPTER II

FOUNDING A FRIENDSHIP

WHEN Clara Strachan, a not uncomely and extremely masterful young woman, married Joe Brown, it had been for the quite simple reason that, so far as she could see, it was a case of Joe or nobody. In one respect she had made a wise choice, for the little man was not without commercial aptitude. Although his business was a very small affair, he prospered mildly, and the years of the war had rendered him more definitely prosperous.

His increased profits in no wise represented wealth; but he had taken a roomy house in the suburb of Streatwood, and had ceased to be "Joseph C. Brown" on his visiting cards, and become "J. Cranstoun-Brown."

The pair had three children, a son and two daughters; and the return from Canada of their cousin, George Strachan, was full of interest to them; for in his case no qualification was required when you called him a rich man. He was a millionaire, and the war had left him quite alone in the world.

Seven years before they had written sympathetically to condole with him on the tragic death of his wife and daughter in a sleigh accident. His son was

left to be his comfort and companion; but Captain Ronald Strachan had fallen in the hour of triumph—in the final victorious advance of the Allies, a month before the armistice.

The visit to England of the childless widower might be fraught with most important consequences to the house of Cranstoun-Brown. Seated at table and plied with *hors d'œuvres*, the pair considered the situation.

The side-whiskers which adorned Joseph's round, good-tempered face made him look out of date. He had a habit of intently perusing his wife's features and expression—actually with the object of ascertaining the state of her temper, but apparently in ever-fresh wonder as to what he had been thinking about when he allowed her to appropriate him.

Time had treated Clara unkindly. Her square jaw, now that she was stout, had developed into a forbidding jowl; and her fleshy cheeks made her small eyes recede into her head, and produced an expression of cunning which was not really deserved. She was a good wife and mother according to her lights, and her ambitions were centred upon the future of her children.

"How long is it since George landed?" she inquired of her husband.

"Let me see, we had his letter on the Tuesday, I think—yes, Tuesday it was, for I remember I had to go over that day to see Bates in Tokenhouse Yard——"

"Yes, yes, and to-day is Monday." The prattling

reminiscence on his side, the ruthless interruption on hers, were both characteristic. "A bare week," she reflected, "and already he has struck up a friendship with a girl. Picked her up here in the hotel, do you suppose?"

"Oh, my dear," in a shocked manner, "I conclude he knew her in Canada—his wife must have known her in Canada——"

"Joseph, don't be a fool. He says she is a typist."

"Yes, yes, quite so; but for all that she might have known him formerly—in better days," his voice trailed off and grew vague as his wife snorted. Her only son had now for some years been marriageable, and she nursed a deep suspicion of all young ladies without means.

"What you and I have to consider is not George's morals, but our children's future," she remarked. "If he has made a protégée of some girl, well, it can't be helped. But we may be able to prevent his marrying again."

"I don't see what difference that would make," said Joseph simply but sensibly. "There's no settled property. He can leave his money to anybody—wife or no wife."

"I think we may venture to suppose that as yet he has made no will. I am convinced that he has taken this journey to England to get into touch with his family." She heaved a big sigh. "What a merciful thing for us that poor Emily has no children."

"'M, wonderful that is, Nicholson being a parson and all. They might have had nine or ten—it was

to be expected—whereas our three have practically a clear field.”

There was a moment's silence while both parental minds made excursions into the future of Gilbert, Phyllis, and Veronica.

“You didn't catch sight of her, did you?” asked Clara presently. “George is fairly simple, or seems so—and the lady typewriter is a useful pose.”

“George's simplicity,” said Mr. Brown, who was becoming mellowed by his excellent lunch, “has taken him far, financially.”

“Which doesn't prove that he knows anything at all about women,” snapped the lady promptly.

Meanwhile, Miss Garth found herself—she hardly knew how—seated in a taxi-cab with Mr. Strachan at her side.

“This is all wrong,” she said, in earnest protest. “You have left guests for me—a stranger! What will they think?”

He was evidently surprised. “Why, isn't it the natural thing to do? You look pretty white, and I couldn't let you go drifting off alone—you might never have reached home.” He was musing upon the address she had given him—that of the Trenby Hostel, a big residential club for young gentlewomen who worked professionally. He knew little of such places, but concluded that it could not be the girl's own home. “Have you no home of your own?” he asked compassionately.

“No home available,” was her swift reply, accom-

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panied by so hot a blush that he felt there must be something painful in her mind in this connection. Her voice repelled further questioning—he was sensitive to tones.

“Will you find anybody in this hostel place able to look after you?” he ventured in a dissatisfied voice.

She laughed reassuringly. “Why, of course. We all look after each other there. We are a jolly lot, and Miss Kay, the Head, is no end good to us. We are allowed to invite our friends—both sexes—to come and see us. Will you come to tea one day if I invite you?” she asked, as it were experimentally.

He returned her look with those serious eyes, whose youth and darkness made pleasant contrast with his brown, lined face and iron-grey hair. “If you are inviting me in the way young ladies do—broadcast, meaning nothing—you are making a mistake. I mean to come, and I would like you to fix a day.”

She was perhaps a trifle hustled by this promptitude; but the tranquillity of his demeanour reassured her. He was—or seemed—completely unconscious of doing anything that was not perfectly normal.

“I did mean it,” she said intrepidly. “Will you come next Monday?”

“Thank you. I shall not forget. But I must do myself the honour of making inquiries earlier than that, and if I do not presume I should like to urge you to go to bed the moment you arrive. These accidents have a curiously unexpected effect some-

times, in the way of a shock to the system, not at first recognised. I hope you will not suffer in that way. Your arm will probably require massage. My own wife once sprained her wrist, skating, and in her case massage reduced the swelling and made the wrist supple in a very short time." After a pause he added, "If my daughter had lived, she would have been just about your age."

Miss Garth was completely reassured. Mr. Strachan's wife was now in all probability lunching with the abandoned guests at the Tuscany. "You have lost your daughter," she murmured impulsively. "I may say I am sorry for you, may I not?"

"I want you to be sorry for me," was the deliberate answer. "That is why I told you. I lost the girlie—and her mother—on the same day. Since then, the war has taken away my only son. I am quite alone in the world. I hope you pity me."

"Pity you? . . . It must be hard to go on living after such bludgeonings of fate. I can't think how you bear it!"

"I don't very well know myself," was his answer, patient with a dreariness which sounded as if within measurable distance of despair. "But if it is any comfort to you to know it, you have helped me a bit to-day. For my lost girl's sake I want to be good to all girls, but especially to those engaged in that fight with the world which we call earning a living. I would not thrust my private affairs on you at such short notice, but I wanted you to know what a

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paternal heart I have, deprived of all chance to do any fathering any more."

Out of the sympathetic silence her sweet voice came timidly at last.

"Mr. and Mrs. Brown—your cousins—they have children, I suppose?"

He smiled a little. "They have. But, conversely, their children have Mr. and Mrs. Brown. It is hardly conceivable that they should want me, though, unfortunately it is conceivable that they should want my money."

"I wish," she said warmly, "that I could help you as you have helped me to-day. You have turned a misfortune into something almost like an adventure, and one is always grateful for that. Life is a bit monotonous for a worker. Here we are already. Only a short drive; and, you see, I am all right"—with mischief. "I could have done quite well without you."

His eyes lit up in response with a deep glow.

"I shall expect you to tea on Monday at four o'clock—don't forget!" she admonished him as he helped her carefully out and rang the bell. "And now dash back to the hotel and make your peace with Mr. and Mrs. Brown."

A cold wind swept down the grey street and whirled dry dust against the inhospitable concrete steps of the barrack-like building. Over her shoulders she laughed at him, her face alight with an expression in which gratitude was mingled with humour, and both with a further something which

he did not remember ever to have met before—a nameless attribute which he longed to analyse.

“I had not believed,” he remarked, “that there were girls like you in London.”

“Thousands and thousands of us,” she assured him as she disappeared indoors.

“I take the liberty to doubt it,” he whispered to himself as he lost sight of her.

CHAPTER III

THE CRANSTOUN-BROWNS AT HOME

THE pretty name of the Cranstoun-Brown residence in Streatwood was "Redmays." It had that one supreme merit which most such houses lack, of being named suitably. There actually was a line of pink hawthorns just within the iron railings which fenced the carriage sweep off from the road.

In the garden borders hyacinths and daffodils were already past the glory of their blooming. The lilacs were in bud; the pink mayes would not be long before they showed their rosy heart.

Within, a fairly commodious entrance hall lay between a dining-room on the one hand and a drawing-room on the other. The stairs were at the back, and behind the dining-room, looking towards the garden, was a morning-room which was the resort of all the family except on occasions when there was company.

In a shabby old arm-chair Phyllis Brown now lounged, her feet within the fender, a thrilling novel in her hand. Tea was spread upon a table behind her, but nobody had as yet appeared to share it with her. She was a substantially built girl, not ill-looking, but heavy in type, with coarse hands and thick

The Cranstoun-Browns at Home 29

ankles. Her hair was elaborately arranged, and her attire showed that she bestowed a good deal of attention upon her appearance.

The sound of the hall-door opening and closing was heard, an umbrella rattled in the stand, an energetic footfall approached, and the second Miss Brown entered. Veronica was several years younger than Phyllis, long and lithe, with a pale face and keen dark eyes, which were really beautiful had they been less hard in expression.

"Oh, my word!" said she, dropping into a chair and attacking the teapot with vigour. "Committees! Committees! This thing'll turn my hair grey."

"Why d'you do it, then?" grunted her sister shortly. "Nobody asked you to."

"Nobody asked me! I like that! When the whole Association came begging and praying——"

"Nonsense. They'd have done much better if you'd refused. They'd have got Mrs. Varick then."

"She wouldn't have taken it," cried Vee passionately. "She's too lazy. She wouldn't have put in the work I do!"

"You've only gone in for it because the war unsettled you," observed Phyllis calmly. She uncovered the hot scones and helped herself liberally. "You got used to flying all over the place, and now you can't sit down quietly at home. Well—all right! Do as you please. But don't make a virtue of it."

"What's put you in such a beastly temper?" de-

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manded Vera, dabbing her buttered scone with marmalade.

"I'm not in a temper. I've had a very comfy afternoon, with Ma out of the way," replied the elder girl, stretching. "This book is jolly good. Scrumptious love-scenes. You ought to read it——"

"No time for tommy-rot. Is the duplicator in order? I've got seventy notices to print off this evening."

The hall-door was heard to bang, and the sisters looked at each other.

"Never Ma back! I thought the American cousin would be safe to take her to a *matinée*," murmured Vee. "Can it be Pa?"

"No. He's going to stay in town for his company dinner. It is Ma," replied Phyllis, listening; and as she spoke, Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown walked in.

"Hallo!" said Vee, pouring out another cup of tea. "So Cousin George didn't suggest a theatre?"

"No; he didn't. We lunched too late," was the reply, in a tone which caused the girl to study her parent's face critically.

"Disappointed, Ma? Did he give himself airs? No use for his suburban family?"

"On the contrary. He is most anxious to know you all. He suggests that he should come here on a visit."

"Houp-la!" cried Vee, pushing back her chair. "When is he coming? Fate send us a parlourmaid before then!"

Mrs. Brown sat wrapped in cogitation. "It won't

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be quite yet. He seems to have a good deal of business to transact. I think I had better ask Foster to stay on, don't you?"

"Raise her wages, without hesitation," cried Vee, and at the same moment——

"Describe Cousin George. Is he tremendously Yankee? Does he carry much sail?" demanded Phyllis.

"Not at all. He is grave and quiet. He doesn't seem to have got over his bereavement yet. He won't speak of it."

"Well, I suppose it's up to us to cheer him with our pretty girlish wiles," remarked Vera, taking the last bit of teacake.

Her mother darted a suspicious glance at her from those eyes which in their hardness and smallness suggested onyx beads. The gift of irony had been omitted from Mrs. Brown's mental make-up. Her youngest daughter was an enigma which she sometimes felt that she disliked. "None of your showing off, Vee, when your cousin comes," she said heavily. "Canteen jokes won't be appreciated. This is serious, mind. He is very rich, and but for your Aunt Nicholson we are his only kin."

"What about his wife's family?" asked Vee briskly. "He may have a dozen nephews and nieces out in Canada."

"He hasn't, however. Did you never hear how he married his wife out of an orphanage?"

"She has my gratitude. Few women are so considerate of their husband's family," retorted Vee.

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"Well, let's arrange how we can best make ourselves disagreeable to him. I'm glad he's grave and quiet. That kind of old buffer generally likes me. I shall be flippant, and he will think me witty."

"You seem to forget that I'm the elder," said Phyllis. "My turn first."

"He wouldn't be likely to bestow all his cash on one and leave out the others."

"Ah, but what if he should marry one of us?" asked Phyllis triumphantly, rising and looking at herself in the chimney glass. "He's only our cousin removed, which is nothing, and he's not too old to marry again."

"My dear, he's fifty!" cried her mother.

Vera laughed. "But old Phyl is right. He is just the age when, if they do these things, they do them with a rush. He feels he is not too old for a bit of pleasure, but he knows how jolly soon he will be! However, Phyl, don't suppose I am going to let you pocket him without a struggle."

"How vulgar, how deplorable!" cried their mother, rising with the rustle of offended delicacy. "I am sure I never brought you up to talk like this. That odious war——"

"Oh, leave out the poor war!" impatiently from Phyl. "It's just Vee's University training."

"You could have gone to Oxford if you had wanted to, Phyl, so don't start grouching about that."

"I never enter upon a war of words with you, Vee," said Phyl, with dignity. "I don't claim to

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possess a bitter tongue, and I don't want the last word."

Vee laughed softly as she picked up her furs and gloves and walked out of the room, remarking that grapes were sometimes sour. Her mother looked darkly after her.

"I do wish Vee would not go on as she does."

"You needn't be afraid," replied Phyllis with bitterness. "Vee knows which side her bread is buttered. When Cousin George comes, she will be an angel—trust her!"

"I never thought to find myself wishing that one of you would marry, but I do wish it. Nothing but bicker, bicker."

"Oh well, come, Mother, Vee takes herself off to this precious secretaryship every day—we don't get too much of her. It must fall to me to take Cousin George for walks, and to call upon our friends. I hope we shall be able to amuse him." Her voice did not suggest any doubt of her ability to do so.

"We must give a dinner-party, I suppose," mused her mother aloud, "and since the war I'm grown out of practice! I suppose I shall have to pay the waiter double, as well as the frightful cost of everything else. Well—I must think it over. Is Gil in or out this evening?"

"Going out directly after dinner."

"Then tell Foster no fire in the drawing-room." The lady paused, her expression lowering. "Gil is always out."

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"No wonder," muttered Phyl indistinctly.

Her mother turned on her. "You say, 'No wonder'?"

"There's no place here where he can sit and smoke comfortably, or ask a friend to join him."

"Upon my word, Phyllis!"

"Well, Ma! Here is Gil, who was a temporary captain, commanding men and earning quite big money, and you expect him to settle down again to live at home as if he was eighteen! Mrs. Varick is so sorry for him."

Mrs. Brown's eyes snapped. "Oh, is Mrs. Varick sorry for him?" said she slowly. "Well, that would be no bad thing, would it?"

"Jolly nice," agreed Phyllis; "but she wouldn't—why ever should she? Poor old Gil! And she with her money and her beauty—and she must be four or five years older than he is."

"Mrs. Varick and her brother are quite the nicest people in Streatwood," remarked Mrs. Brown thoughtfully. "We must ask them to meet George Strachan."

An hour later the son of the house arrived home and admitted himself with the latch-key for which he had successfully contended when his military career came to a close. He was a big man, holding himself with the well-drilled air of the ex-officer, but somewhat clumsy in type, nevertheless. He was clean-shaven and had inherited his mother's heavy jaw. Phyllis was still lounging by the morning-room

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fire when he peeped in, and he remarked with sarcasm, "Keeping the fire warm as usual."

"Um!" was the reply, the young lady's eyes being glued to the love scene on the page before her.

"Mater back? Met the Splendid Cousin all right?"

This theme was of interest enough to induce her to close her book. "Yes; they met all right, but she doesn't seem particularly bucked over it. However, she says he was very cordial and is coming down here to stay with us."

"Perhaps he was a bit let down," suggested Gil. "The mater hasn't got younger and more beautiful since he last saw her."

"You'll have to pull yourself together, Gil, and do the devoted son while the Ontario millionaire is about. Ma is on the war-path about your never being at home of an evening."

The man's brow darkened.

"I'm about fed," said he, "and so I shall say to her if she tackles me. I wish this man would find room for me in his lumber business. I'd chuck my present job in two twos if he'd take me out there."

Phyl yawned. Her brother and his concerns were not, and never had been, of any interest to her.

"From what men tell me, I shouldn't advise Canada if you want to have a good time," she remarked. "However, if he falls in love with me, and takes me over there when he goes back, I'll promise to do what I can for you."

"You're jolly kind," with sarcasm. "I expect to

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enjoy the spectacle of my entire family grovelling to the golden calf."

"You'll be as bad as any of us," was the retort. "But I'm not afraid of you. It's Vee who will lead him on a string, unless I can be too quick for her."

He laughed. "You'll have to get up pretty early in the morning to get ahead of Vee. By the way, where is she? I want to ask her if Mrs. Varick gave her a message for me."

CHAPTER IV

A CURIOUS REQUEST

WHEN George Strachan made his visit of inquiry at the Trenby Hostel, he was shown into a big, gaunt drawing-room.

At that hour—about midday—the room was untenanted, and the emptiness and the full daylight accentuated its shabbiness and drabness of tint. Manlike, he ignored the fact that the elderly chairs were comfortable; that the floor, with its loose rugs, could easily be made ready for an impromptu dance; and that the platform at one end, holding a piano, would become a stage on the mere dropping of a curtain.

These, the main concomitants for the happiness of a contingent of lively girls, forced to sit still in offices all day, were duly present at the Hostel. The millionaire, however, thought only:

“And this is all the home the poor child has!”

Miss Garth was up and dressed, and she did not keep him waiting. He had been wondering, as he came along, whether his remembrance of her was unduly favourable. But when she entered, he knew it was the other way about. She did not wear her office suit now, but was clothing in a most becoming shade of powder blue, her crisped hair snooded with

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a band of velvet the same shade, so as to conceal the big bruise on her brow. Her left arm was in a sling, and she looked somewhat pale; but he saw, in one swift appraisal, her distinction, her fineness of quality, the subtle nature of her charm.

"Good morning, Good Samaritan," said she mischievously; but she coloured as she gave him her hand.

"Samaritan! Somebody outside the pale, am I? Well, I must try and live down that reproach."

"Ah, you know what I mean! You came to the rescue of a total stranger—not even of your own nation."

"Not at all. I am as English as you are. I went out to the Dominion many years ago; but I was born in Westmorland."

She gave a start and her face kindled. "In Westmorland! Why, so was I——" she broke off so suddenly as to leave the impression that she regretted having imparted the information.

"I hope you think that constitutes a basis for friendship?" he ventured.

She liked the deliberate sentences he used. His foreign intonation gave weight to his most ordinary utterances. She admitted that their community of county did constitute a basis for friendship; but nevertheless she switched off the talk at once to another topic.

"Before we chat comfortably," said she, "I want to put things right. I was feeling so unwell on the day of my accident that I could not collect my

thoughts. I know you incurred some expenses for me, and I want to get out of your debt."

He looked so hurt that she had almost said: "I beg your pardon."

"I shall feel rather badly if you will not let me do that very little for you. Just now you informed me that you regard me as a Samaritan. Let me point out that the gentleman in question was allowed to put down the price of the sick man's hotel, not to mention the taxi—I should say, the ass."

Miss Garth looked under her eyelashes to make sure that this was not serious, and detected the genial curve of the strong lips.

"I wish I hadn't made that silly comparison. I see the cases are not a bit alike. That sick man had been robbed."

"So had you—of one of your hands! No, the wounded man in the story was not proud, and you are. Come now! If I let you call me a Samaritan, surely I may claim his privileges?"

She opened her mouth for further protest, but, faced by something in his eyes, she never made it. "Oh," said she, "you really are impracticable!"

"Yes, I've been told before that I'm a tough proposition," was his amused rejoinder. "But anyway, I hope you are better."

"I'm quite well . . . were your friends in a very bad temper when you got back?"

"Not very. The food was good. That mollified them some. Then we talked. It seems to me that

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in England people work very hard for mighty poor results," he commented meditatively.

"I suppose that's true. We girl clerks are better paid than we used to be, but our pay hardly keeps pace with the price of things. We can only just get along, and we can hardly put by for old age without forgoing everything that makes youth gay. I think there is much excuse for such girls if they break away. When a chance comes—a temptation that seems to offer something different—they leap for it, and only find out what a fraud it is, far, far too late."

He looked gravely sympathetic. "In my office in Ontario, my stenographers are paid a living wage from the first," he said.

The girl laughed. "I had better go out to Ontario."

"You might do worse. But there is another arrangement I would like you to consider. I came here to put it before you. This is no Good Samaritan stunt, but a business proposition. I am here in London without a secretary, and I want one badly. Until I got over this side, I did not realise what a scourge the correspondence was going to be. I would like you to be my secretary. If not you, then I must engage a stranger. But I would rather have you, for a particular reason."

"Yes?" she was greatly interested.

"Well," said he, "as I have told you, I am a widower and childless. I am also counted a rich man. I have by way of relatives, only two cousins, Mrs. Nicholson and Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown. I in-

tend to pay visits to both these cousins. Mrs. Nicholson has no children, but Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown has three—a son and two daughters. I am anxious to make a will, and my disposal of my money will be guided by what I see of the character and capacities of these young folks. The difficulty lies in the fact that I can never hope, in the circumstances, to see any of my relatives, young or old, as they really are. You understand?"

"I—think so—yes, of course, I do."

"Of course, you do. You would. I have always known, from the first words you spoke to me, that you are very able. If you are my secretary, I can take you with me, to visit both the Nicholsons and the Cranstoun-Browns; and you will be able to give me your opinion."

The girl's eyes rose to meet his with a flash of comprehension. Then she lowered them; and the oddness of her expression forced itself on his attention. She looked strongly tempted, but beset with doubts. He watched her keenly.

"Isn't it a very strange thing to ask me to do? These people are your own kin."

"Well—hardly. The relationship is not close. I don't think I understand either my cousin or her husband. Moreover, I am beginning to suppose that money warps the mind a little. There seemed to me something noticeably sycophantic in the manner of both the Cranstoun-Browns. But I may do them an injustice. In short, I will not trust my own unaided judgment."

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She laughed unsteadily. "You have made up your mind about me, but are not sure of them?"

He contemplated her unruffled. "I am a business man, and I have trained myself to observe," he said. "In such matters I do not make mistakes. It is only in this case, where this detestable money question comes in, that I distrust my impressions."

She turned aside, and did not speak. Evidently she was torn with indecision.

"See here," said he after a moment. "You can't use a typewriter yet, but I think you are well enough to answer letters by hand. Come to the hotel for a few days, and help me to tackle my arrears? Then you can see how you like working with me?" As she did not immediately reply, he added: "I am not mistaken in supposing that you do this kind of thing for a living?"

She started. "Oh, no, there is no mistake about that!"

"And you are at present without regular employment?"

"That is also true, I regret to say."

"Yet you are very doubtful about taking my job? You don't precisely jump at it. Is it because we have made acquaintance with nobody to introduce us?"

She coloured slightly. "Perhaps."

"If an employer wished to engage you, what steps would he take? He would go to a bureau and make inquiries?"

"Probably."

"And would they take up his references before allowing a young lady like yourself to enter his employ?"

"N-no. I don't think they do that."

"Well, then?"

She met his droll smile and laughed. "I'm really not so prudish," said she. "The reason why I hesitated was—was quite different. Of course, I will come to work for you to-morrow, if you will allow me not to make any definite reply about the permanent secretaryship."

As she spoke, the door was flung open, and a page-boy entered with a card on a salver. He stood gazing vaguely round, and then addressed himself to Miss Garth.

"'Scuse me, Miss, is there a young lady staying here, name of the Honourable Miss Osbourne?"

Miss Garth sprang to her feet, and as suddenly re-seated herself. "I don't think so—why?"

The boy consulted the card. "Lord Clement Vyner has called to see her," said he.

"Go and tell the gentleman he has made a mistake. . . . Or perhaps you had better ask Miss Kay first. She may be expecting the lady."

The boy vanished and her visitor stood up to go. They parted cordially, with the arrangement that she was to present herself at the Tuscany at ten o'clock the following morning.

As Strachan passed out, he encountered a well-dressed man with a sulky face, standing in the entrance hall. As he approached, the stranger ad-

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dressed him. "Are you a visitor?" he asked abruptly.

"I am," replied Strachan, rather surprised.

"Then they do allow visitors of our sex?"

"I had no difficulty."

"Thanks, thanks," said his lordship with a nod; and Strachan passed out.

A moment later Miss Garth opened the drawing-room door and emerged upon the long passage.

Lord Clement stood at the far end of it, but she was visible to him as he stood, and he started forward with a sharp exclamation, bitten off between his teeth.

The girl's eyes had hardly fallen upon him before she turned aside and vanished from sight through a swing door.

"Charis! Stop! What is the use of this behaviour? I must have a word with you."

He was hard in pursuit. It took him, however, some appreciable time to reach the swing door; and when he opened it, he saw a staircase, leading both up and down, and also three doors, all closed. There was no sign or sound of his quarry. He hesitated, but decided that he dare not risk opening doors, or ascending stairs, in a strange place. The clatter of the page-boy, charging down the main staircase behind him, decided him to return to the entrance, which he regained just as the boy reached the bottom stair.

"Miss Kay's compliments, my lord, and there's

no Honourable Miss Osbourne here, and she ain't applied for rooms either."

"Who is the lady who was in the drawing-room when you took in my card?"

"Miss Garth?"

"Exactly. I should like to see Miss Garth."

The boy's countenance expressed suspicion. "Names not much alike, my lord."

"Of course not. Miss Garth is Miss Osbourne's friend. I am sure she would know her address."

The boy hesitated. "Shall I go and ask her, my lord?"

The flustered visitor produced a shilling and was ushered into the vacant drawing-room.

His messenger was absent a weary while, and in the interval the clanging of a great bell announced that the hostel was about to lunch.

At last the page's round face was seen again.

"Miss Garth's gone out, sir. Miss Kay said I was to tell you that she won't be in all day."

"Can you tell me at what hour I should be most likely to find her in?"

"You won't find her at all, sir, not after to-day. She's leaving to-morrow, Miss Kay said."

"I suppose they would forward letters?"

"I suppose so, my lord."

CHAPTER V

WHO IS MISS GARTH?

IT was so long since George Strachan had awakened from sleep with that sense of pleasurable anticipation which makes the zest of life, that when this miracle happened in his comfortable quarters at the Tuscany he was at a loss to account for it; and it was only by degrees that he traced his uplifted spirits to the recollection that his new secretary was to arrive that morning.

It was with a feeling of entering farther into an interesting experience that he awaited her arrival after breakfast. The weather was still cold, with the unrelenting severity of an English spring, and the fire leapt and crackled on the hearth. Nevertheless, the sun was shining, and his room faced south, across the ripples of the slow highway of the great little Thames.

The girl of whom he was thinking so pleasurably came in smiling, her hands full of daffodils.

"Here," said she, holding up the flowers to his face, "here is the taxi-fare you would not let me pay, transmuted into pure gold."

"In this form," he replied, "I will take it gladly; and the more gladly because, you know, it constitutes a precedent."

"Oh, don't be too confident! I can't afford to do it often."

"Naturally. The point is, what you may do, I may do. You have asked me to tea and given me flowers. That establishes my claim to do likewise."

His eye was whimsical. She laughed with him.

"Like Touchstone, you are very swift and sententious," said she. "I see that I must be careful, and walk warily. And now let us settle down to work, for I must leave early to-day."

"Why, what have you on foot?" he asked, as he laid bundles of letters on the table.

"I'm leaving the Trenby Hostel," she said quietly.

"Indeed!" He was surprised. "You said nothing of that to me yesterday."

"I was occupying another girl's room, on the understanding that she must have it if she came back; and she wants it," said Miss Garth. As she spoke, she coloured brightly, and Strachan felt that he had been inquisitive. He apologised, and no more was said, for they plunged into the morning's work. But his active mind was at work. Could her sudden flight be connected with the visit of the gilded youth he had seen in the entrance hall of the Hostel the previous day?

It was not until she stood up to go that he asked her what her future address would be. She told him she was going to a small hotel for ladies only, in St. George's Square, but that this was merely a temporary refuge. "I have not decided where I am going," she owned, with a somewhat troubled mien.

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"I think," remarked he, "that I had better fix up my visit to Streatwood, and take you with me."

She was evidently tempted. "Streatwood? Is that where Mr. and Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown live?"

"Yes. It is they who have the young people, and young people interest me. The visit to Mr. and Mrs. Nicholson, who live in the north of England, can wait."

"In the north?"

The question was swift.

"Between Brough and Teesdale." She made no comment, but sat very still as though meditating deeply.

"Well?" he said at last; and she started.

"I want to talk to you about—about what you suggested to me yesterday," said she at last.

"Well—does anything prevent your talking right now?"

"Yes," she smiled. "Something does. I don't wish to say anything which may sound critical of you."

"Plenary dispensation accorded beforehand. Proceed."

"Well . . . that was a curious thing you wanted me to do, was it not? You want to employ me, practically, as a spy—upon your own cousins."

"Almost, but not quite," was the imperturbable answer. "Let me point out that what I want is not a spy, but a critic. A spy would betray confidences, and that I would not wish. I desire an opinion of

the family from a complete stranger, and one from whom they can expect no favours."

"Yes, but they will be off guard before me. It is taking an unfair advantage, surely."

"I think not. If a person have two manners, one for the individual he may desire to conciliate, the other for those who are more or less at his mercy, the mere fact stamps that character. But I am so placed with regard to these particular people, that I can hardly test the point myself. I want your judgment. I don't ask for the data on which you base it. You are a disinterested spectator. The manner in which I dispose of my wealth cannot matter to you. You have no prejudices with regard to these folks."

"No. But likes and dislikes are odd things. It is hard to be quite free of pettiness. Are you not afraid that I might pay out your nieces for some real or imagined snub by running them down to you?"

"Not a bit. I have the greatest confidence in you; and I need you badly. People sometimes talk as if the disposal of a fortune were unimportant, but it is never that. I am the last surviving Strachan of our family, and I feel I have a duty to fulfil as regards mine. I want to act wisely, and I believe you can help me to do so. The Browns are not poor people. They have enough to live upon; and if they are small-minded, or greedy, or vicious, they will be better without riches. I am not asking you to spy, but simply to report. Do you think you can do it?"

"I am pretty sure that I *could* do it."

"But you hesitate?"

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"For the remarkable reason that I want so much to go to Streatwood with you, that I hardly dare consent . . . yet . . . if you come to think of it, I shall be no more a spy than is any inquirer who sets himself to study the psychology of those with whom he is thrown into contact. One would not call Henry James a spy, for example."

"Quite so. Neither would I call a headmaster a spy, when he consults his prefects on the tone of the school."

Her eyes flashed approval. "An apt illustration! Well, now, may I bore you with a little personal history?"

"Go right ahead," he replied with delight.

"I told you yesterday that I was born in Westmorland. Our village—and we didn't even live in the village—was seven miles from a railway station. I had very few companions, and they were all of one class and type. They all thought the same thoughts; held the same opinions, used the same *clichés*. Well, I'm ambitious, I want to be more than a secretary—I aspire to write a book. But I have to gather some experience first. I broke free, and came away in order to find out how the world went. I have loved being in the Hostel, seeing how girls live—but most of all I have craved a chance to go right into the family of such people as I imagine your cousins to be . . . I thought you ought to know this, it might change your views as to the expediency of taking me with you."

"Why so?"

"At least it seemed right to assure you that, if I do go there with you, I will take no unfair advantage in print. I won't put your family into my book so that anyone could know them."

"Thank you," he said, with considerable amusement. "As a man of business I feel inclined to suggest a bargain—that I am allowed to see the book in return for assisting you to procure the material."

Her colour came furiously. "I must seem an ungracious ingrate—but the fact remains that I don't want to promise even that," she muttered.

His bright eyes considered her with infinite relish. "I was forgetting that I come from Samaria," said he quaintly. "But I waive all claim. You come with me unconditionally to Streatwood. You see, I have made up my mind about you. You are trustworthy."

She caught her breath, and lowered her eyes. "If anything could put one more especially upon honour, it would be your incredible generosity. . . . I'll try and live up to it."

"And you'll be ready to start off with me in a few days' time?"

"The sooner the better. I am very anxious to leave London."

CHAPTER VI

NEW IMPRESSIONS

THE family at Redmays was at dinner, when the letter from Strachan arrived by the evening post, and was brought to Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown.

"Well, I'm sure!" said she, in nettled tones, as she looked up from its perusal.

"What's the matter?" asked the master of the house amiably, as he helped the fish. "From Strachan, did you say? Is he not coming after all?"

"Oh, he's coming right enough," snorted the lady. "But a millionaire cannot travel unattended, it seems."

"Going to bring a batman?" asked Gilbert.

"A valet I should think only suitable to a man of his wealth. But it is a *secretary* he asks leave to bring."

"Good!" cried Vera, flourishing her napkin. "A young man in the house will liven us up!"

"Your cousin's secretary is a young lady," remarked her mother in an ominous voice. "In fact"—glancing with heightened colour at her husband—"it's the typewriting girl, Joe."

"Indeed!" Joe Brown smiled enigmatically, and there arose a volley of questions from the family. Miss Garth! Who and what was she? A girl who

had fallen downstairs, and whom Cousin George had befriended?

"So that was the day you lunched with him," mused Vee. "We thought there was some crumpled rose-leaf in the menu, didn't we, Phyl? Dare I hazard the guess—arising out of the minutes just read—that the lady is young and attractive?"

"We didn't see her," said her father hastily.

"Phyl, I believe you're too late in the field after all," said Vee with a prodigious sigh. "It's really interesting, this."

"Surely," pondered her mother with furrowed brow, "we can refuse on the score of accommodation."

"With three spare rooms in the house? Bit too thick," observed Gilbert.

"I think you would be unwise to make any difficulty, my dear," said the mild husband. "And I see nothing in the least out of the way in Strachan's request. He is in a very large way of business, and I only wonder he came over without a secretary. His correspondence must be enormous."

"He wants to bring down his chauffeur and car as well," went on Clara, who seemed a trifle overwhelmed.

"The maids will be only too pleased to have a man to meals in the kitchen," laughed Vee. "We can do up the little room over the stable; Gil has wanted it for a work-room for ever so long. Buck up, Mater, it's well worth doing. Even if he leaves us only ten thou—a mere drop in the bucket!—it would

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be worth your while to lay out a hundred or so, wouldn't it? Why, it's all perfectly thrilling! Not only is the millionaire cousin descending upon us—a god in a car—but he actually brings with him a hated rival, whom we must overthrow by our superior strategy! Phyl, we must have new frocks! My quarter's salary is just due. Cheer oh! I was wondering yesterday why I took up that stupid old work, and now I know! . . . Look at Ma! Shall I tell you what she is thinking? I know as well as if she said it out loud! It is that the moment has arrived for a new spare room carpet, and that, since the carpet must come up, it will be an excellent chance to get the room papered too! I know Aunt Nicholson is having their best room papered; she said so in her last letter."

Vee's intuitions were almost uncanny, as her mother remarked to her father that night, as they made ready for bed. "They were the very thoughts passing through my mind at the moment; but how could the child have known?"

"Hope she won't be too sharp for her cousin's taste," returned Joe, mildly speculative. "A rich man his age likes something soft and confiding."

"Vee's dreadfully clever," sighed his helpmate. "She will feel instinctively for the right line to take. And in America" (Canada and the United States were all one to Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown) "they are accustomed to something very go-ahead, are they not? What I don't like is this business of the lady secretary."

"My dear, George Strachan is as straight as they make them."

"Who doubted it?" she snapped. "Is the girl straight? That is what is bothering me."

* * * * *

It was a beautiful afternoon when the swift car coursed through Streatwood, found the Heriot Road, and slipped into the hospitably opened gates of Redmays.

The house wore an air of well-being even beyond its wont. Every window sparkled, every muslin blind was snowy. On the door step stood Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown, and Phyllis was smiling at her side. The eyes of both, gay though their greeting to Cousin George, were fixed in keenest scrutiny on the secretary.

Miss Garth wore a long rough motor-coat of the plainest. Beneath this, when she removed it in the hall, was seen a dark blue coat and skirt. She wore no carmine on her cheeks, nor bloom on her nose, no silk stockings, no scent. In fact, the first view of her was distinctly reassuring, and it was with a relieved mind that the hostess led the way into the drawing-room. This was no siren. As she ushered in her cousin, she murmured confidentially:

"I suppose you would prefer that Miss—er—Garth, should take her meals with us?"

He looked blank. "Where else could she take them?" he asked in a puzzled way.

"Oh, quite so, quite so. It is far more convenient

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to me, but I only wanted to do what you would like best."

"That is certainly what I would like best; and now—where is my other cousin—Veronica?"

He seated himself close to Clara, near the low tea-table upon which the silver was faultlessly bright.

"Oh, haven't you heard? Veronica is out all day. You know she is clever, and her father gave her a University education. It makes a girl so capable! And when this League for a Higher Life was founded, just after peace was declared, she was importuned by all the best people round here to become secretary. I wanted it to be honorary, but she objected. She said she ought to be paid, because she might be succeeded by another girl, less fortunate than she, who might not be able to afford to give her services."

"That sounds sensible," said Strachan approvingly, "and it does not leave you alone, Clara! You have one nice daughter to keep you company." He looked with approval at Phyllis, who wore a pretty light-coloured dress, and whose hair was becomingly arranged. She gave an impression of youth and sturdy health.

She was so pleased with her cousin's admiration that she actually unbent so far as to turn to Miss Garth and make a few remarks.

All was progressing most happily when the door was flung open and in walked Vee in her office frock and shabbiest hat.

"Hallo!" said she, "so the Splendid Cousin has

duly arrived? Where's the Secretary? Ah, I see. Well, Cousin George, stand up and be looked at!"

She held out both her hands, and Strachan took them, rising to his feet, his mouth curved in its pleasant smile.

"H'mps! Not a bit what I expected! How satisfactory!"

"Vee!" warningly from her mother; but Strachan laughed outright.

"Well now, little cousin, tell me why you thought I should be an ogre?"

The girl seated herself, pulling the cake-stand towards her and helping herself. "Haven't I seen plenty of portraits of my Strachan ancestry?" quoth she; "and oh, but they were dour folk! Enough to turn milk sour, most of 'em! Like lumps of northern granite——"

"Take care!" he warned her. "Not myself only, but Miss Garth, whom I present to you, comes from the north!"

"Hallo, Miss Garth," said Vee, "forgive my falling to before I had greeted you, but I am ravenously hungry. I've had such a day of it! Our Vice-chairman said the minute I took did not convey the sense of his speech. He put it to the vote and lost by a big majority."

"Oh! So you have male members of your League for a Higher Life?"

She nodded, sipping her tea. "All sorts. It's great sport, really; but a bit confusing. Some think

we ought to amalgamate, or affiliate, or something, with the Purity League or the White Rose or some of those things; and old Miss Bennett said in committee that if this was done all unmarried ladies must leave the League, which I thought insulting."

"Vee!" Again her mother's menacing note.

"What is it, Ma? Cousin George comes from Canada, and out there they don't keep their girls in a drawer, rolled up in tissue paper.

"Is that where they keep you, Miss Vee?" demanded Strachan, merely for the pleasure of hearing her retort, which was:

"What do *you* think?" with an intentional vulgarity and a flashing smile, both provocative.

"Well," said he, "I hope they don't keep you in an *office* drawer, all day and every day. I have plans for some good long runs in the car for anybody that way disposed."

"Cousin George, what can you possibly hope to get out of me, starting to bribe in this shameless manner? Why, I'd sell my soul for a motor tour! I must see if I can't get a holiday somehow."

Phyllis had to clench her teeth to bite back words. She had reckoned upon a week, with Vee out of the way; and now the girl had bounced in, and seized, as it seemed to her, in five minutes more than she could have hoped to accomplish in that week.

"My sister is quick to make friends," she remarked sourly to Miss Garth.

* * * * *

"Here's tosh!" said Gilbert, a couple of hours later, encountering Phyllis on the stairs. "The mater says I'm to get into a dinner jacket."

"Good thing, too. You're such an old slouch," was the unsympathetic reply.

Her brother grunted, and continued his slow way to his room, where he most unwillingly changed.

His temper was so bad that he thought he would prepare himself to be agreeable to his influential cousin by turning into the old schoolroom and smoking a cigarette before proceeding downstairs. It was not cold this evening; the lack of a fire would not be prohibitive.

There was a fire, though, blazing merrily. On the table lay a number of documents, and a typewriter in its case.

On the hearthrug, lost in dreams, a girl sat, staring into the flames, whose radiance flickered on her white arms and serious profile, gilding every thread of her loosely gathered hair.

CHAPTER VII

GEORGE STRACHAN'S HEIRS

THE young man's evening shoes made no sound to reveal his presence. Closing the door behind him, he remained motionless, staring at the stranger on his hearth.

As he contemplated her she smiled suddenly at her own thoughts. Such a smile! Such a wonderful mouth, full of meanings, full of mysteries!

The firelight gilded the delicate outline of her bare arms, and he caught sight of a black bandage round one of them. This, then, must be the secretary—the object of his mother's dark suspicions. Gilbert could afterwards remember quite clearly that his first emotion on beholding her was a fear lest Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown might say or do anything offensive.

Why this possibility should present itself to him as intolerable he could not have said, and had not time for reflection, for Miss Garth looked up and saw him. She made no movement to rise, but looked at him expectantly, and he came forward awkwardly.

"I'm afraid I'm intruding. My people never told me this room would be in use," he said.

She rose then and gave him her hand, smiling. "Are we turning you out? What a shame! But,

you see, we must have somewhere to work. It takes at least a couple of hours a day to keep down the correspondence."

"I see," he said slowly, going to gaze upon her machine. "How can you manage to type with your injured hand?" he asked, with real curiosity.

"I have only just begun to use the machine again. My sprain is practically well now."

He made a comment upon the make of her typewriter, and she left her place beside the fire to answer his questions, laying upon the well-kept keys a hand and wrist which seemed made of a different flesh and blood from that of Phyllis or Vee.

"I suppose," she remarked, "that you are Mr. Cranstoun-Brown, junior, and that you slipped in here for a quiet cigarette before dinner. Do smoke, in spite of my intrusion, won't you?"

"Oh, no; I'd better go. Clumsy of me to blow in like that."

"If you go I shall feel uncomfortable. I am merely waiting in idleness for the gong to sound, and gloating in the luxury of this fire."

"All right, if you will, too." He went to a cupboard and got out a box of dainty Egyptians. "These are my ladies' brand," said he. "At least, they are what Sheila Varick likes."

He handed them to her, and she took one naturally. "Who is Sheila Varick?" she asked.

"She's one of these pitiful war widows," said Gilbert, seating himself opposite to Miss Garth at the fireside. "Her brother, Major Doran, and I were

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Territorial officers in the same battalion when war broke out. One leave he brought home Tommy Varick, who fell head over ears in love with Sheila. Next leave they were married, and had eight days' honeymoon; and—and—Tommy Varick never had another leave after that."

"Poor girl!"

"Yes. I think it all seems to her rather like a dream now. There was something quite unlike real life about that kind of wedding—that snatching of a few days' happiness out of death's jaws. But I don't think it broke her heart, you know. It was all over so quickly—she knew so little of him, really. . . . The Dorans are about the only people worth knowing hereabouts," he added, after a pause, during which he watched with earnest gaze the turn of Miss Garth's wrist as she held her cigarette.

She received his confidence with interest, tinged with a guess that Gilbert would welcome Mrs. Varick's inconstancy; and with George Strachan's interests in mind, she studied the heavy-faced young man rather narrowly.

"When you came in," said she presently, "I was thinking how beautiful the quiet is here. I have been living near Vauxhall for the past six months, and this is sudden peace. I—I don't think I expected to find Streatwood such a pleasant place."

"Oh, it's all right when you get here," conceded the young man morosely. "Personally I should prefer Vauxhall. One is close to the hub of things there."

"Yes, that's true," she replied ponderingly. "Why don't you live in town?"

He shrugged. "My people wouldn't like it," he answered shortly. "A man has to take his sisters about, and so on."

"That's considerate," she said approvingly. "Mr. Strachan would admire that trait in you."

"What kind is Strachan? Very old-fashioned—what?"

"Do you want me to describe him?" said the girl softly. "Well, he is a knight of old, born by accident into the world of to-day. I could point you to some lines of Wordsworth that hit him off pretty neatly; but I won't. I leave you to find out for yourself. There's always a pleasure in discovery, isn't there?"

"Sometimes," he replied, with meaning.

"It must have seemed rather weak of me," she subjoined after a pause, "asking you if you were Mr. Cranstoun-Brown. But I really did not feel sure. You are not a bit like your sisters."

"So Mrs. Varick says."

"Your sister Veronica is evidently a Strachan," went on Miss Garth. "She has her uncle's long, oval face and slightly aquiline nose, with those dark eyes; only hers are not so melting as his. But when she smiles she is very like him."

"Is that so?" said Gilbert mechanically. He hardly heard what was said, his whole attention being focused upon the speaker.

The secretary laughed softly. "There! Now I

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have bored you—and that in the first ten minutes of our acquaintance! I know that some men hate the subject of family likeness.”

He made polite protests, but rather with the air of one whose manners moved on rusty springs, not often in use. He had a decided likeness to his mother, and with her massive jaw had inherited her small eyes. His, however, were not set close together, as were hers; and they were blue-grey in colour, not boot buttons, as Charis Garth had in her thoughts irreverently described the lady's.

The room was very quiet. The curtains had not been drawn, and a slim crescent moon hung over the distant roofs of the houses in the next road.

It was hardly twilight, but enough of day was gone to make the firelight show up on the side of the room away from the window. It illumined the lines of Miss Garth's slim form, painting it with gilded edges, like a Rembrandt. The coals sank together with a soft, crushy noise, and the cat on the rug purred as the girl's slippered foot caressed him. It was so comfortable that they almost forgot to talk; and when the gong for which they had been listening sounded they started, looked at each other, and smiled. It is permissible to wonder which of the two would have been more surprised, could the thoughts of the other have been made known.

They descended the stairs side by side, just as the rest of the family issued from the drawing-room on its way to dinner. There was a savoury smell of soup in the air, and Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown wore a

look of satisfaction, for the visit had begun well, with the sole exception that Gilbert had not as yet appeared.

As she glanced up and saw him and the secretary side by side coming calmly downstairs, she experienced a mild shock. Her boy! She had previously supposed the secretary to be setting her cap at the millionaire himself; but here was another and an unwelcome possibility!

"Ah, here is Gil," said her little husband, in tones of satisfaction. "Come and be introduced, my boy. I thought you had not come in."

"Phyl knew I was in," was the rather curt response.

George Strachan grasped his hand, and thought with regret that the young man was too like Clara to be lovable. However, he made his greeting as pleasant as he could. "What a big chap you are!" he said. "And have been through the whole of the war—Mons Star and all, I hear! I shall want to be told about that."

Clara sighed a little as she led him into the dining-room and placed him on her right hand. Gilbert's military career had been a disappointment to her. Major Doran and he had gone out together, both of them as captains, in the earliest months. Now Doran was a major and had won the Military Cross. Gil had remained a captain, and acquired nothing more honourable than wound stripes. She could not, however, speak of this to Strachan; and her preoccupation with the serving and waiting at

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table made her at all times a bad conversationalist at meals. However, there was no lack of talk. Strachan was agreeably disappointed with the family. On closer acquaintance he thought his first verdict had been unduly unfavourable. He began to hope that he was not quite so destitute in the matter of kinsfolk as at first he had feared.

After dinner there was a little music. Miss Garth most suitably declared that she neither played nor sang, so Phyl and Vee got their chance without rivalry. They performed like any other girls of their class and type. They had no natural taste and not much ability; and though they had had expensive lessons, the result was deplorably mediocre. The most one could say of their performance was that a quarter of a century earlier it would in all probability have been worse.

Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown, however, being herself entirely without discrimination, was very well satisfied. She told Mr. Strachan that the girls had had every advantage, and condoled with Miss Garth upon the privation of not being able to perform. Miss Garth replied that her father had held the view that a girl with no natural taste for music should not waste her time in learning to play a musical instrument. Mrs. Brown complacently approved, but remarked that she was glad her girls had so marked a taste, otherwise their father and she would have missed a great deal of pleasure.

Gilbert struck in suddenly and remarked that for his part he did not think the girls were really musical

at all. He had offered to take them to the new Strauss opera, and they had not cared to go.

Miss Garth turned her head to him swiftly. "You like music?"

Gil hesitated a moment, and then said: "I know nothing at all about it, but it has a great effect on me. At least, I know enough to know that that isn't music," nodding his head towards the girls.

"So, after all," reflected Miss Garth, "he is really the least commonplace of the family."

After the musical performance Vee inveigled everybody into playing a round game of cards, in which she sat next to Cousin George, and shamelessly helped herself to his counters when her own ran short, rising from the table by this means the winner of ninepence, to her sister's hardly concealed vexation.

However, Mr. Strachan was laughing and quite animated when they separated for the night.

But to Gilbert the whole time passed like a dream in which nothing was clearly focused, except a quarter of an hour spent almost in silence sitting in the firelight, opposite a girl who was wholly unlike any girl in his previous experience, while a crescent moon swam in a spring sky that shaded from sapphire to apricot.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DINNER-PARTY

THE house of Redmays, upon the morning of the day fixed for the dinner-party in Strachan's honour, showed a somewhat startling departure from its usual routine of well-ordered comfort.

So complete and heart-whole was its abandonment to the effort of the evening that the visitor thought, with a twinkle, that it must be supplying his secretary with excellent "copy."

It began at breakfast-time. Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown, looking worried and absent, suggested his taking out Miss Garth for a long motor run, as she and the girls would not be at leisure to entertain him. This he cheerfully consented to do, for he was always content to drive with his congenial companion. He declared that during the past week he had learned more of the history of his native land, through the medium of its village churches, than he had ever acquired by means of history books.

A trivial incident caused the alteration of this plan. Flowers for the dinner-table were under discussion, it happening to be the day of the week when neighbouring florists were ill supplied with fresh ones. Miss Garth suggested that the garden contained masses of lovely lilac, both white and purple.

Looking compassionately at her, Mrs. Brown vouchsafed the information that lilac will not live in water. Miss Garth, with a smile, very courteously assured her that she was mistaken.

"I will guarantee that any lilac which I put into water will live several days in its full freshness," said she. "I assure you I am talking of what I understand."

"H'mph! One of these Swanley students, are you? But they are of no use. Old Colonel Doran tried one. She expected him to do all the weeding. If you took up floriculture professionally, may I ask why you gave it up, Miss Garth?"

"I never took it up," said Charis, smiling. "But I do know the secret of making lilac live in water."

"Lilac is, in my opinion, not a table flower."

"Oh, no. I would not put it on the table. But we might do the whole drawing-room with it, and put a big pot in the hall. Then you would need to buy only enough tulips for the table."

"We may as well try it, Ma. Flowers are such a price," said Phyllis grudgingly. She had decided, within a few minutes of her cousin's arrival, that she would be his wife; and she was of an iron determination. Her feeling, not only towards Miss Garth, but towards her own sister was that of smothered rage and spite, ever ready to break out; and only Vee knew the full urgency of the motives which goaded her onward, and how vital it was that she should marry a rich man shortly.

It being conceded that the experiment be made,

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Strachan gladly consented to postpone his drive; and his secretary went into the garden and gathered odorous spikes of young, just-blooming flowers, looking as though the tips had been dipped into red wine, too lately blown to show any trace of suburban grime. Having borrowed a hammer, she proceeded to pound the hard, woody stems into pulp and fibre for two or three inches up, and then disposed the branches in deep vases with a dexterity which her hostess was fain to admire.

"It'll set people talking," said Phyllis, watching. "Everybody always says you can't cut lilac because it won't live. I feel doubtful, even now, if it won't be hanging its head in a few hours."

"Let's bet on it, Phyl," said Cousin George, who, cigar in mouth, had been watching the whole process. "Five pounds to a photo of yourself that Miss Garth's flowers won't wilt."

"Ugh! Corrupter of youth!" said his disrespectful secretary, who was on excellent terms with him by this time. "So Yankee too! Talking about wilting! You should remember you are British, should he not, Miss Cranstoun-Brown?"

Phyllis, who had turned crimson when her cousin thus asked for a photo of herself, stared coldly. "I should not think of criticising Cousin George. I will take his bet," said she; and to her annoyance Cousin George said teasingly to Miss Garth, who did not seem at all crushed:

"Thank you, my dear. You managed that very nicely."

Managed that? Phyllis went off with her mother's keys to get the best glass out of the cupboard, pondering this mysterious phrase.

"Did he mean that she knew he wanted my photo, and that she spoke against him on purpose to make me a little angry, so that I should take the bet? I suppose so. Then has he told her that he admires me? Perhaps. He had hardly been here five minutes before he showed that he thinks me pretty. Does he think her pretty, I wonder? I don't. But she's clever in a sort of way. No doubt he finds her useful. However, when I marry him, I shall persuade him to get rid of her. Something about her that confuses me somehow."

After lunch Miss Garth quietly suggested to Strachan that he should take Phyllis instead of herself out in the car.

"She looks tired," said she, "and I can help Mrs. Brown in her place. I find it interesting, you know. It never occurred to me before to wonder how people manage when they give a dinner-party."

Thus it was arranged, and Mrs. Brown, to her own surprise, found herself allowing the secretary to wipe wine-glasses and blanch almonds, to fill cut-glass finger-bowls and strew a few violets in each.

Like most otherwise commodious suburban houses, Redmays contained no servants' hall, and only a mere slip of a pantry—just a bit of passage boarded off, with a sink fitted at the end.

"It's not very roomy, when there is such a lot of silver to be washed up," sighed the care-worn host-

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ess. "Did your mother do much entertaining, Miss Garth?"

"My mother died when I was a child, and was an invalid for some time before her death."

"Then I suppose you don't remember where the silver was washed up when there was a dinner-party, do you?"

"Why, really, I haven't an idea. I suppose the but——" began Miss Garth, biting off a word short and growing rather pink.

"The *butt*? What, the soft-water butt? You must be mistaken, I am sure. They could not have used that."

"How stupid of me. Of course not. Our country house—our house was in the country, I should say—was old and rambling. We suffered from too much space rather than too little."

"I see. One of these old-fashioned houses. No conveniences."

"No, none."

"In Westmorland, I think you said?"

"Yes."

"I don't notice that you have any north-country accent."

"It—it isn't very marked, I think. My mother came from the south."

"That would account for it. How did she like all the inconveniences? I suppose your water had to be pumped?"

"Yes, it was all pumped."

"You had a garden man, perhaps, who could do it."

"I—I believe it *was* done by a—the gardening man." (But he didn't do it half as persistently as you are doing it now, she added to herself.)

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Brown genially, "after living so secluded it's really quite a chance for you to see a little society. There's one thing, it's all the best people in Streatwood that you'll be meeting this evening."

Charis gravely replied that she had no doubt it would be most interesting. A sense of shame was pricking her. Was it fair to allow the simple-minded lady to go on spreading herself?

"Whoever marries one of my girls," continued Mrs. Brown complacently, "will marry one that has been trained to keep house in the correct style. Everything good and solid has always been my motto. Plentiful supplies, but no waste permitted. There is not much of such housekeeping nowadays; but my daughter, Miss Cranstoun-Brown, is truly domestic. Her husband will have a treasure. I hope she is enjoying her drive."

"She can hardly fail to enjoy Mr. Strachan's society, I think. He is so thoughtful for others."

"Even those in his employment," replied Mrs. Brown, while her boot-button eyes regarded the speaker furtively. "I think my cousin's spirits have improved since his coming here."

"I am sure of it," replied Miss Garth, with a cordial alacrity which was flattering.

"I thought it would be so. We are his own kin, you see; and blood, after all, is thicker than water."

Having made this pronouncement with all the emphasis of one who has hit upon an original and striking thought, the lady departed, leaving her guest to finish polishing the glasses, with an odd expression compressing the corners of her tucked-in mouth—an expression suggesting guilt. She had to whisper to herself, "My daughter, Miss Cranstoun-Brown," before she could allow herself to be amused; and even then there was a moral uneasiness. She was sailing under false colours, and the knowledge humiliated her.

Since his bereavement social functions had been to Strachan bitterly repugnant. He would not, however, allow his anti-social inclinations to appear, since he knew the guests had been bidden to do honour to himself, and he understood in part the gratification which Clara must feel in presenting him to her friends.

At the urgent request of his flurried relatives, he dressed in good time and joined them in the drawing-room before the arrival of their guests. The daughters of the house were both extremely smart. He did not like their gowns, but could not explain to himself the cause of his disapproval. He watched for Miss Garth to come down, with an earnest hope that she would present a contrast. Some important letters, with which he was obliged to deal, had arrived by the afternoon post, so his secretary was a little late. No guests had, however, arrived when

she slipped quietly in. She was in white, and a necklet of seed-pearls was round her throat. Her abundant hair was very simply arranged, and she wore no gloves nor bracelets. It was thus not easy to say why she conveyed the impression of being much more *en grande toilette* than anyone else present.

Both the Brown girls had red ears as well as red hands. There was a red mark upon their chests, due to wearing blouses low in front. The arms, displayed almost without sleeves, were of coarse and mottled texture. Miss Garth's ears were cream-colour, slightly warmed to pink, like the petals of a tea rose. Her ringless fingers were rosy only at the tips.

She entered with a slight apology for lateness, to which Mr. Cranstoun-Brown cordially replied that Strachan had duly explained.

Gilbert was standing stiffly on the watch. He had hardly spoken two words to her since the first evening of her stay, and he found the sight of her oddly overwhelming. When, not having seen him that morning, she now acknowledged his presence with a slight bow and smile of greeting, he felt ridiculously as if some member of the Royal Family had accorded him gracious recognition.

As for Charis herself, she had dressed as plainly as she could, with the express intention of being outshone by the other ladies. She now perceived that she had struck the wrong note—that something in her elaborate simplicity looked as though holding

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up the other girls to an unspoken condemnation. She could but trust that such subtleties would not occur to the Redmays family. To the host they did not; his wife and daughters, however, without understanding, felt obscurely snubbed.

To cover her own vague sense of dissatisfaction Vee began to chatter.

"How good something smells! Why, it's lilac! Well, Ma, how many times have I wanted to use our lilac, and you would never let me!"

Miss Garth glanced at the masses of bloom and laughed up at Strachan. "Miss Cranstoun-Brown has lost her bet; you will get your photo," said she.

"What's that? What's that?" cried Clara. "A bet between you and Phyllis, George?"

"I bet Phyllis five pounds to a copy of one of those nice pictures of herself, such as you have on the mantelpiece here, that Miss Garth's lilac would not wilt—I ask pardon, would not fade; my secretary is particular about my English."

His cousin caught with glee upon the portion of this remark which she understood. There was some joke, some little incident, between her daughter and George. Phyllis, all smiles, had gone to a drawer and extracted an elaborately mounted and mistily focused photograph, which she presented to Strachan, who received it with *empressement*. Perhaps he rather spoilt the effect by remarking:

"I thought my five pounds was pretty safe."

"But how *did* you make lilac live in water?" demanded Vee somewhat peremptorily of Miss Garth.

Before the latter could reply, the one-night butler threw open the door and announced the first arrivals.

All the rest of the party were assembled by the time a name was given out which made Charis glance towards the door with interest.

"Mrs. Varick and Major Doran."

These two were the subject of more or less constant talk at Redmays, and she knew them to be brother and sister.

At first sight of them she felt a slight tremor, for these looked like people of her own sort. Major Doran was good-looking, well set up, and tailored by someone in Savile Row. His sister was a woman you would notice in any room—self-possessed, with grace of carriage, and a little head which she held proudly. She was older than Charis had guessed her to be—she must have been thirty—but at first sight of her one instantly thought, "Oh, you charming creature!"

Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown presented them both with effusion to Strachan; and Charis, in her capacity of looker-on, watched with interest, as Vee drew near to the conquering major, and Gilbert to his sister.

"Hallo, Major!" was Vee's greeting, accompanied by one of her daring looks. "How's the world treating you? And what do you think of our tame millionaire?"

"Millionaire, eh?" said Doran, turning his gaze upon Strachan with attention; but in an instant he turned abruptly to Vee and said in an undertone:

"Who is the fair unknown? Is she his wife?"

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"The fair unknown?" Vee was genuinely puzzled.

"There, over by the window," he went on, "a woman you would not expect to see in Streatwood. In pity tell me who she is. Wonder what that gown cost."

Vee started. "*That!* My cousin's secretary, do you mean?"

"Your cousin has my congrats. Worth being a millionaire, if one can do oneself like that in the matter of a secretary. I suppose you and she are pretty chummy, being in the same line of business?"

Vee coloured angrily. "Not much resemblance. I took on my job for fun, as you know. But she has to earn her living."

"Earns a good one, judging by her gown," said Doran in an absorbed way.

"You talk as if she were the only woman in the room who had a gown on," snapped Vee, desperately piqued. She suddenly felt that the local dressmaker was intolerable. What *was* there in the cut of that little white frock?

"She makes me feel like that," he answered, unperturbed. "Do make me known to her, won't you?"

"Come along, and see if she is as charming as she appears," replied Vee; and though she was trembling with mortification she managed a light note. She saw her mother cast a baleful glance, but returned it with a defiant glare, led the major up, and presented him to Charis, who received very calmly the full,

steady gaze of fine grey Irish eyes above an abundant golden moustache.

"Garth?" said Doran gently. "Any relation to General Garth? I was under him at one time."

"None whatever. None of my uncles is a general," she replied indifferently.

"Do you know, I have a kind of idea that I have met you somewhere?"

"Indeed? Very likely," she replied, with an implication that she might easily have met him without remembering the fact, which stung him in his very vulnerable vanity.

"Do let us try and think where it can have been—it is a rather fascinating game—like that deadly guessing game where you may only reply to such questions as may be answered by 'Yes' or 'No.' "

"If that will amuse you," she returned listlessly, and for a moment he thought she was dull; but almost at once he revised his opinion. She lifted her eyes and looked at him, quietly but searchingly; and somehow that look told him that she was purposely trying to seem dull, in order to detach him. Now why?

CHAPTER IX

AN EXCITING SCHEME

MISS GARTH'S honest intention to melt into the background was easier of design than accomplishment. It had seemed to her that the presence at table of a meek supernumerary, plainly garbed, would pass unnoticed save by the male guest who was considered unimportant enough to have to take her in. But the exigencies of precedence had obliged the hostess to place the younger people towards the middle of either side, and when they were seated Charis found that she had Major Doran on her left. Her right-hand neighbour, a deaf and nervous middle-aged solicitor, had, of course, the first claim upon her conversation. The major, however, assailed her upon the other side with such persistence that finally she was obliged to turn to him.

As long as his conversational openings were merely "feelers," she was obstinately monosyllabic; but when he proceeded to the mention of a new play lately presented, she yielded to the temptation to discuss it with one who had evidently not only seen much, but had even thought—a little. But they had not talked long before the flame of Vee's resentment seemed to reach her like tangible heat. With a hurried "I don't know; ask Miss Veronica—she can

tell you," she turned her shoulder to him and resolutely tackled her solicitor, who could apparently fix his mind upon nothing but the culture of salpiglossis.

"I can assure you," said he earnestly, "hundreds of people with gardens don't know their value as a means of obtaining a mass of varied colour at a small outlay—and so easy to grow."

Her interest was so well feigned that in a burst of confidence he disclosed to her the name of his own special seed merchant, even going the length of writing it down for her upon the back of his name card. It was just as she looked up from this absorbing transaction that she caught Gilbert's eye across the table, and wondered what, exactly, it expressed. It was, however, not until much later in the evening, after the emergence of the gentlemen from the dining-room, that she found herself near enough to him to ask him.

"I caught you looking at me across the table in the midst of my struggles to be interested in Mr. Wibley. What were you thinking about, I wonder?"

He looked for a moment utterly loutish and tongue-tied.

"Why, I—I was just *looking* . . . you were right opposite me, you know. . . ."

"Oh, what a let-down for my vanity! You seemed to be saying so much—to be looking so significantly! I thought you were admiring my Christian charity—or perhaps despising my hypocrisy."

"The second conjecture would be nearer the mark," was his most unexpected answer. "You are

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a good actor. The poor chap had no idea he was boring you . . . but the truth is——”

“Yes? The truth is——?”

“A thing one never tells,” muttered Gilbert, looking at the carpet.

She hesitated, faintly puzzled, and made as if she would pass on.

“No, don’t,” he suddenly said. “Sit down here and talk to me. Since that first evening you have hardly spoken to me, and I’m no worse than old Wibley, anyway.”

“Ah, but entertaining *you* isn’t part of my duty,” she reminded him demurely. Nevertheless, she sat down, for she was tired.

Gilbert’s vigilant mother was deeply absorbed, at a distance, with her back to them, talking to a companion of congenial age and tastes.

“Now,” said the young man deliberately, “I want to know something about yourself. Where do you come from?”

She looked wicked. “I was born of poor but dishonest parents——”

“We’ll cut the prologue,” he broke in doggedly and without a smile. “Are you a Londoner?”

“Kind sir, I am not. I am a sort of Lucy, to tell you the truth. I dwelt among the untrodden ways, beside the springs of—not Dove, but some other river of much the same kind. A maid whom there was none to praise and only one to love.”

“Only one?” sharply, and as it were angrily.

A shade crossed the downbent face upon which

his eyes were steadily fixed. "Only one, for a long time. My mother died when I was twelve, and my father, so I am told, spoilt me horribly. I never had a brother to take me down, as I hear you take down your sisters. We lived in retirement, and I suppose I grew unbearable, for, after remaining a widower for seven years or so, my father married again." Lifting her eyes for a moment, she inwardly recoiled from the dumb feeling in his, and shook her head with a provoking smile. "Oh, you're quite wrong. The lady didn't turn me out. On the contrary, she thinks me a perfect toad because I wouldn't stay at home. She thinks I am so selfish to leave her alone in her dullness . . . when she has *him*, all to herself! That's what I can't bear. She has stolen him from me, and now she has got him she is already tired of it."

Gilbert said absolutely nothing for some time. Had she reflected, she might have wondered how she knew that his silence was the measure of his sympathy.

"You'll go back," he said at last.

"You think so? I wonder. What I mind is, not having her in my place as mistress—oh, how soon I could forgive her that, if she made him happy! It is the seeing him miserable which upsets me so! . . . And now," she looked at him challengingly, "you have heard more than I ever told Mr. Strachan!"

His face changed oddly. His lips quivered. He had large lips, but they were finely cut. "You like my cousin?" he asked.

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"Not 'alf," whispered she, with a daring smile, which he shared.

"Will you go back to Canada with him, do you think?"

"It's possible I might, if he wants me. But, you see, there is a difficulty. In the eyes of a censorious world we still want a chaperon, he and I, in spite of modern emancipation. He is a very proper old dear, and I know he thinks so. So we shall probably be obliged, reluctantly, to part . . ."

"Or——" began Gilbert, and stopped on that.

"Or engage a chaperon," she finished glibly, "if he takes a house in England. I believe that is what he thinks of doing."

"He—he may do as your father has done," hazarded Gilbert.

"He may, of course; but somehow I don't think he will—not yet awhile, anyway. He talks always of his dear people, rather as if they were awaiting him the other side of the Atlantic. It's rather pathetic."

"Yes. It's pathetic."

"Well," said Miss Garth with some briskness, dragging him out of one of those silences of his which she found oddly eloquent. "Now it's your turn. You've had my history. The second traveller then commenced the narrative of his life. Were you born in this house?"

"No. I was born in a little white house on the Common. Much nicer, to my thinking, but less pretentious. In those days, the place wasn't much

built over. It was just leaving off being a village, and my mother used to let me go out to play on the Common."

"And then I suppose you went to school?"

"Yes. To Haileybury. I didn't do much good there. However, my mater was set on my going to Oxford, so I went. Never did anything there, either. Just not good enough for my college boat or my college eleven. I'm what they call a hopeless mediocrity."

"Do they? Then they haven't much discernment."

"What do you mean by that?"

"A mediocrity could hardly get outside himself and judge himself as you have just done. And what do you do now? Did you, like everybody else, find it hard to settle down after the war?"

"Hard to settle down? I'd do any job that gave me a chance to earn a living. But there's nothing doing. I'm in my father's office because I can't sit fuming at home; but I'm farther from advancement of any kind than I was six years ago. However, I hope I see a break in the clouds now——"

"You do?"

"I want to persuade Strachan to take me out into his business in Canada. Only I'm afraid he thinks I'm a fool——"

As she was about to reply, Major Doran's voice broke in.

"Miss Garth, you monopolise my company commander."

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"Not one of your happiest gambits, Doran," said Gil dryly. "It is I, on the contrary, who am monopolising Miss Garth."

"Easily understood; but don't go. I have something to talk about, to both of you. I have been having a long chat with Mr. Strachan, who is positively one of the best. It appears he is intending to go up north to stay with some relatives of his, and wants to do the journey in his car. It dawned upon me that Sheila and I have been contemplating a tour, and that your party is rather big for one car and ours too small. If we have two cars, we can divide more comfortably—eh? Some scheme, Gil? Your father will give you a fortnight off, won't he?"

"I can take a fortnight of my holiday now instead of later, if that's what you mean."

Miss Garth smiled. "You think a tour would bore you, Mr. Cranstoun-Brown? Why not be brave and say you are not coming?"

"Because I am coming," said Gilbert, in such a snubbing voice that she and Doran laughed teasingly at him.

"You'll get used to Gil," observed the Major easily. "He's a bit of a Cymon, who hasn't yet met his Iphigenia."

"Don't understand the allusion," muttered Gil, this time in tones decidedly sulky.

"Look at your 'Decameron,' if Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown allows such a thing in the house. But now come over here and help us to thrash out this important scheme."

They both followed him to where Cousin George sat, as it were, enthroned upon the settee, with an air of enjoying himself very much. Beside him was Mrs. Varick, leaning back in her corner, with a face full of approval. Phyllis sat on a low chair, facing them, and Vee knelt at her cousin's knee.

"Come here, Gilbert, we want you," said Mrs. Varick, with the pretty little air of married-woman patronage which sat so well upon her. "We have hit upon the best idea that has come my way for months, and we owe it to the vast brain of this wonderful cousin of yours!"

"Yes, isn't he priceless?" cried Vee. "I never thought any real live man could be so attractive."

Gilbert hunched his shoulders and stared at Sheila in his meditative way. "Strikes me, if Cousin George goes, Doran and I will get a pretty thin time," said he. "Look at you all! Disgraceful!"

"You must forgive us!" cried Sheila. "He really is, as Vee says, priceless! He has been telling us all about his early life! He was born in Brough, all among the moors; but as soon as he was old enough to work, they sent him to Darlington, and he was there in a dirty factory, like George Stephenson—all among whirring machinery and hot oily smells! But whenever he had a holiday, he used to escape, up to Teesdale, or the valley of the Greta, and now he is going to stay with his cousin, who is vicar of some place near what he calls 'Barney-Cassell.'"

Strachan's eyes twinkled appreciatively at the pretty speaker, who had caught his accent exactly.

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"I guess I shall be pretty well gayed before this trip is over," said he. "However, go on, little girls! It amuses you, and I can stand it."

As he spoke, his eye caught that of his secretary, and he saw a disturbed look on her face. "Miss Garth," said he, "I hope this plan of the tour has your approval?"

Charis flinched. She saw Mrs. Varick's beautiful eyes upturned to her in deep surprise. She caught a hostile flash in the eyes of Phyllis; and, worse than all, she heard from behind her the peculiar little snort which always heralded the annoyance of Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown, who had been busy bidding her guests farewell, and now came to know the meaning of the vivacious group clustered round the sofa.

"What can it be for which the approval of Miss Garth is so necessary, George?" asked she, with weighty sarcasm.

"Mr. Strachan was joking," said Charis gently, furious with herself for the hot colour which she could not control and for her knowledge that Major Doran was deeply on the alert.

"Why, Clara," said Strachan, "I must tell you of this plan which has suddenly leapt into being. We intend to make a tour of the north in my car and that belonging to Major Doran. But you look as if you thought I was hardly to be trusted with all this youth and beauty?"

"We *are* rather sweet, aren't we?" said Vee rapturously. "As dear Lord Tennyson so winningly put

it, we are rosebuds set with little wilful thorns, and sweet as English air can make us."

"And Mrs. Varick," said Strachan gallantly, "is queen rose of the rosebud garden—eh?"

Clara gulped. She began to feel that she might have done more wisely to keep her millionaire to herself than to introduce him to the charming Dorans. With all the force of her will she intended that Gilbert should marry Sheila Varick, and Veronica the Major; but as she looked at the unexpected sociability and content of Strachan, she had a sinking of the heart. What was there to prevent his remarriage? Even her maternal partiality could not persuade her that Phyllis was anything like as attractive as Sheila.

"Do you think," Vee was running on, "that girls ever were really like that? Pouting and babyish and adorable? I'm sure Ma never was—were you, Ma?"

"Your mother was a handsome girl," put in Strachan gallantly. "I remember she wore a thing they called a bustle, to hold out her frock behind——" He broke off, shouted down in a chorus of "Shame!" by all the girls.

In the laughter which followed Mrs. Brown had time to regain her poise. The motoring was a daring scheme, true, but so delightfully modern and wealthy-sounding—quite the sort of plan of which she could boast to her acquaintance. Whatever the Dorans did was right in her eyes, and that her own children should, by their cousin's generosity, be in-

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cluded in the tour, was a source of gratification which nothing could spoil.

Vee burst out:

"There once was a bold millionaire
Who conducted a bevy of fair
Young people like posies
Of lilies and roses—
And I really can't think how he dare!"

"Impromptu?" said Doran approvingly. "Good, Miss Veronica, good indeed!"

"I really can't think how he dare!" repeated Strachan with relish. "My accent and all, you little terror!"

"I mean to make a book of limericks during the tour and present it to you, Cousin George, on our return—if we ever do return, which seems to me unlikely now that I know the Dorans' chauffeur is to go with us, as he is celebrated for emptying me into ditches! Ah, well, well! That was a first instalment, merely to give you a touch of my quality! It is nothing, simply nothing to what I shall venture upon later on in our bold, bad career! I don't know what I may say or do, as Ma won't be there to sit on my head!"

"No, but I shall," said Doran menacingly. "Have I your leave, Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown, to correct your daughter judiciously?"

"Steady!" said Strachan dryly. "If this trip comes off, it is understood, please, that I am Dictator. I dispense the higher, low, and middle justice. All offenders are brought to me for correction."

"Agreed!" was the unanimous cry, and the millionaire looked whimsically at his cousin Clara with his hand outstretched.

"Hear that? Can there be a doubt of my controlling them? This expedition will glide along on velvet now that everybody knows I mean to run it!"

CHAPTER X

COMPARING NOTES

DIRECTLY Strachan and his secretary were alone together after breakfast the following morning he laid his hand over hers as she sat rather listlessly at the table awaiting his dictation.

"And now, my dear, tell Daddy all about it," said he tenderly.

Charis glanced up at him, hesitated. Her lip quivered.

"You don't like the idea of this trip?" he asked kindly.

"Oh, what a saint you are! How you bear with my folly and tantrums!" she murmured, looking down and nervously tracing scrolls on her blotting-paper. "Do please remember that I'm your employee——"

"And no more?" he asked, after an interval.

His voice sounded hurt, she thought.

"You are much more to me than just my employer," she said in a low voice, "but that is not to the point. I—I've never told you anything of myself—I don't say my Past, for that sounds lurid, and very unlike the facts, which are dull as dull can be. But I think you know that I have left home, and—and that I don't want my people to know where

I am to be found. . . . Oh, I'm not heartless. I send them news of my safety, and they have an address to which they can write. But I don't want them to track me down. In fact, I won't have it, . . . and, you know, they live up there."

"Near Brough?"

"No. Among the lakes. Not far from Hawes Water."

"Oh, but we can easily avoid——"

She stopped him, with passion. "Don't! Just fancy my whims interfering with your convenience! You must go where you like, and not consider me. If you are going in that direction, I can easily be taken unwell and get left behind for a few days . . . but that your secretary should be making stipulations! Well, you heard what Mrs. Brown thought of me last night!"

"I regret extremely that I let you in for anything of the kind. It was thoughtless of me. Well; but now that you have more or less taken me into your confidence, the thing can be managed without an effort."

"Don't you think," she said, colouring deeply, and evidently forcing herself to make the suggestion, "that I had better not come at all? Could you not do without me? . . . Vee is very capable, and a trained secretary."

He turned with a quick movement and searched her face. "You want to leave me?"

Her answer was inaudible, but she shook her head in a decided negative. He subjoined, after a silence,

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"I sometimes think you are in some trouble I could likely help."

She cleared her throat. "Then I am giving you quite a wrong impression. I am in no trouble. I am enjoying myself hugely. I am absorbing all kinds of new impressions."

"Studying the curious underworld squirming beneath your microscope?"

"Oh!" She started, blushing hotly. "What are you talking about?"

He met her gaze humorously. "I'm not quite blind, Miss Garth; and remember, you did let slip the fact that you intended to write a book. I gather you are amassing some new experiences?"

"Indeed, yes."

"What of this tour? Won't it help?"

"Why, of course, but——"

"From my point of view," he said seriously, "your presence will be invaluable. Character will be displayed inevitably during such long periods of companionship. I shall need my watchwoman more than ever."

She dwelt upon his kind, wise smile. He was extraordinarily fascinating, and as she gazed the smile broadened, became in fact a chuckle.

"What is your opinion of Vee?" he asked.

"I haven't decided yet. But I think I like her."

"She is vain, though. She likes to show off. She talks at large. Her sister is more honest——"

"No!" cried Charis quickly.

"You think not?"

"I think Phyllis is the cunning one. Vee is easy to see through; the other girl is continually scheming."

He demurred. Evidently his judgment did not jump with hers. "Yesterday, when she and I drove together, I found her more conversable than I expected, and she seemed to be a right-minded girl."

Charis laughed. "I begin to realise that you do need me, badly," said she. "Men seem to be easily gulled. But, as a matter of fact, I have not nearly made up my own mind yet. I only know which of the family I think has the most character, so far."

"Which is that?"

"The son."

"Gilbert? Well, now you *do* surprise me. He seems to me both surly and stupid."

"He said you took him for a fool. Can't you see that his refraining from any attempt to curry favour is an excellent sign? Especially when you represent literally his only hope——"

"His only hope? How so?"

"Why, the war cut him off short, just as he had done with Oxford. Now he is back in civil life, at close on thirty, with no prospects. He wants to go into your business——"

"Well, but do just say what it is you see in him? I grant there is plenty *of* him physically—but besides that?"

"Perhaps," said she, after a moment's thought, "one has a natural sympathy for anybody that is starving."

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"Starving?"

"Yes. He seems to me as though all the better part of him is dwindling and pining away for lack of nourishment, because he is so unlike the rest of his family."

"Then he has confided in you?"

She laughed a little. "That was what made me think it might perhaps be safer for me not to go with you on this tour," said she. "Please don't think me unduly vain. I don't suppose myself irresistible; but I think I am sympathetic, and if a man has literally nobody else to speak to——! However, seriously, I don't think we need fear complications of that kind, since Mrs. Varick is coming too."

He looked quite startled. "Mrs. Varick?"

"She finds Mr. Gilbert interesting, I am sure, and she is really charming."

"She is indeed. But older than he, I imagine."

"Only a year or two. What's that?"

He fell silent, turning over these side-lights on the situation in his mind. "I can't picture any pretty woman looking twice at Gilbert Brown," he said at last.

"As far as I am concerned, make yourself quite comfortable," she answered gaily; "but I assure you there is much more in him than you have discovered. Do try and cultivate him. He will never toady to you."

"Yet he told you he was thirsting for sympathy?"

"Mercy, no! Nothing of the kind. I know it

by my psychological insight—little casual things, dropped unconsciously.”

“Things he would never, conceivably, have said to me?”

“Certainly not.”

He smiled upon her humorously. “I’m glad you think of writing a book. It should be a clever one.”

She shook her head, laughing.

“What impression,” he wished to know, “was made upon you by the psychology of the great Major Doran?”

“Ah,” said she mischievously, “I wasn’t hired to report upon him. His psychology doesn’t come in.”

“Pardon me. If he should marry either of my young cousins, it would certainly come in.”

“I see! Well then, after what I heard the girls say, I was agreeably disappointed. I pictured the spoilt eligible of a second-rate neighbourhood. But he is an interesting talker, and didn’t try one bit to patronise the humble secretary, though Vee carefully assured him of my dependent position at once, to save mistakes.”

Strachan’s smile widened to a grin. “I advise you to begin that book at once,” said he, taking up the letter she laid before him, and smoothing it out; “but if you write it and don’t give me a chance to read it, I’ll never forgive you!”

CHAPTER XI

COLONEL MORRISON WONDERS

MAJOR DORAN and Mrs. Varick dined at Redmays the night before the party started on their tour. Since the first arrangement the party had been increased by the addition of a friend of the major's, one Colonel Morrison.

This was the eldest son of a local landowner. He was a friend of Gilbert and Doran, having had much to do with the raising to a war-footing of their battalion.

Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown did not welcome his society altogether, since she believed him to have intentions upon Mrs. Varick. But, on the other hand, he represented the top note of social importance in her eyes. He intended to stand for the constituency at the next election, and the thought of being able to talk to her friends of his presence as a member of the party gave her indescribable pleasure.

She looked back with thankfulness upon her own foresight in determining that Gilbert and Vee should go to Oxford. Joseph had had his doubts, but she had insisted. Her children would now, she hoped, take their places one step higher on the ladder than

their parents, a circumstance which seemed to their mother matter for rejoicing.

What with her anxieties respecting the disposal of Strachan's fortune, and her matrimonial schemes, she was consumed with an excitement and a pre-occupation which she found most distracting. She had taken, by slow degrees, a fixed and increasing dislike to Miss Garth, and was convinced that this young woman meant to marry either the millionaire himself, or her son, the millionaire's heir. It was her daily manœuvre to prevent Charis from being seated next either Strachan or Gilbert at table. Charis was usually placed between her host and Phyllis; but on this night Colonel Morrison's presence made the sexes equal, and it was impossible to avoid putting Gilbert on one side of the siren.

As soon as the talk became general, Gilbert started to make the most of his chance.

"Do you remember Doran, when he was here the other night, called me Cymon, and said I had not met my Iphigenia?"

"Yes, I think I do."

"I had no idea what he meant. I thought of Simple Simon, or something else equally uncomplimentary. Of course, there was not a Boccaccio in the house; but I bought one, and found out."

Miss Garth had grown red. "Major Doran has a smart tongue," said she, "and people who talk smartly are apt to be careless. The allusion was neither courteous nor true."

"It was awfully interesting," he replied, "and I

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have been thinking about it a good deal. I am so like Cymon that I can follow the workings of his mind. I have always realised that I don't easily get on with people; but I knew that was because I don't like what they like, or think as they think. It did not dawn on me that everybody looked on me as a dolt. Well, I think Cymon was in the same case. He wasn't an idiot really—he had simply never before come across the thing he was looking for—like a match that has never been struck, you know. I expect he wished, afterwards, that the thing had never happened. It's a bad thing for shepherds to cultivate a taste for king's daughters, isn't it?"

Miss Garth was so surprised that she was taken at a disadvantage. "That would depend, wouldn't it," she answered vaguely, "on him, and on the princess too?"

"You mean, was she what Hans Andersen calls a real princess?"

"Perhaps I meant rather—what did she stand for, to him? If the sight of her opened his eyes to what was noble and beautiful, he would be better and happier for the meeting, would he not?"

"What, if he had to go back and marry into his own class?"

"Now, what has class to do with it? Is there no beauty or nobility but in one? His vision of the princess has taught him to look out for it, and if he seeks he will find."

After a pause Gilbert said: "Cymon wasn't seek-

ing. He was just mooning along as usual . . . and there she was."

"But don't you see"—she was talking eagerly now, as to an equal—"half the significance of what you perceive is in yourself! You were right when you said Cymon cannot have been a dolt. If there was nothing in him to respond, he would have gazed unmoved upon the loveliest of women."

"Which is what Ulysses meant when he said, 'I am a part of all that I have met.'"

She was surprised at his aptness.

"Do you feel it a difficulty," he went on, "that the Kingdom of Heaven is sometimes found by those who don't know they are looking for it?"

"No. Because their part comes *after* the discovery. They must go and sell all they have and buy the field. There are the two qualities that make all greatness—effort and sacrifice!"

"If they preached like that in church, they might get one to listen," observed Gil without a smile."

"Preaching, indeed!" she answered lightly. "Let us talk of something less grave—the fun we shall have to-morrow! Will you not be glad not to have to put on a stiff collar and go to the city? Doesn't the thought make your blood dance?"

"So much so that I have to sit tight and keep it under," he replied. "I can hardly believe it can be going to happen to me. I wish I need never go back to a London office. However, when I catch myself feeling like that in future, I shall say to myself, 'Effort and sacrifice.'"

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As her eyes met his for a moment, Charis shivered. This must not be. She turned to her host, who was on her other side, and definitely included him in the conversation. He was a great authority upon the roads in his neighbourhood, and she succeeded in interesting him so much that his son could not lure her back into the intimacy of private talk.

After dinner, someone—nobody quite knew who—suggested Dumb Crambo.

In the unimaginative family of Cranstoun-Brown it had never been seen before. The Dorans, however, were quite used to it, so Mrs. Brown, at first somewhat inclined to bristle, soon grew to think it the most delightful of sports.

She was amazed, as was also Strachan, at the effects produced with a few scarves, cloaks, hats, and shawls. Miss Garth, it soon appeared, was an adept, and Major Doran contrived to appear in almost every scene in conjunction with her. They sat together in a casino, with cigarettes and little piles of money, with Gilbert as croupier and Morrison as a plunger who finally put a revolver to his own head and shot himself. They strolled past a ranting speaker in Hyde Park, and stood to listen to what he said, while Vee picked their pockets and was arrested by Gil, in an old volunteer uniform. Then Doran played a serenade under her window, and she leaned out and tossed him a rose.

In the midst of her complacency this angered Mrs. Brown, who ascribed all to the secretary's

machinations. However, Strachan, who sat beside her, was so delighted and amused that she was ashamed to show any dissatisfaction.

Gilbert had at first declined to take any part in the proceedings. Miss Garth quickly induced him to change his mind, and he proved, in fact, a great acquisition, having perfect control over his facial muscles.

Towards the end of the evening, when invention was waning, and the fatigued company was searching for a rhyme to the word "bake," Gilbert suddenly went up to Miss Garth and said, "Let us have a really good one for the last. Let it be 'Wake.' I'll be Cymon if you'll be Iphigenia."

He said it purposely in the hearing of Doran, who eagerly caught up the idea. Miss Garth pressed the part upon Mrs. Varick, but as she had just been performing the death of Cleopatra, she declined, and began to help group the picture before Charis had time to object. Gilbert placed screens across the garden end of the drawing-room, so that the audience could not see his arrangement of the couch covered with a leopard-skin. He then proceeded to attire himself, by wrapping puttees round his evening trousers, taking off his coat, rolling the sleeves back from his brawny arms, wrapping himself in a rough frieze cloak, and ruffling his hair till it fell over his forehead.

Miss Garth let down her tumultuous locks, and lay on the couch with her white dress draped in

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silvery drapery, and Doran grouped the other girls in attitudes of slumber about her feet.

When the screens were withdrawn, Gil was outside, in the blue summer night. The gravel crunched under his deliberate tread, and he came in, carrying his alpenstock, shaded his eyes, peered at the sleeping group, advanced, and halted at the foot of the couch like a man turned to stone.

It was all a makeshift, rough, unfinished, but it was quite beautiful. Strachan felt himself holding his breath.

Gil, after standing perfectly still for a long breathing space, moved a little nearer, sank to his knees, and clasped his hands.

"I hope he won't kiss her," muttered the hostess uneasily.

"That," said Doran, "would be quite out of keeping. This is not the Sleeping Beauty. It is the Boccaccio story of Cymon and Iphigenia."

"Oh, of course," said the lady, who had never heard of the author, but in view of the intimacy which seemed to exist between him and Major Doran dare not say so.

Strachan came to her rescue with an avowal of the utmost frankness. "I confess to ignorance, Doran. I know of only one Iphigenia, and she, if memory does not play me false, was the daughter of Agamemnon."

The Major rose, and drew the screen across. "The story is that Cymon, who had always been

taken for a fool, was uplifted by the sight of perfect beauty and perfect purity into a fully developed and charming young man. It's not unlikely, you know. The sort of thing that does happen, now and then."

An uncomfortable instinct told Strachan that it had undoubtedly happened to his cousin Gilbert.

"Well," said Mrs. Varick, as she and the two gentlemen were whizzed homeward, "how do you like your future fellow-travellers, Colonel?"

"Quite pleasant people," he returned, with cordiality, "especially Mr. Strachan. The lady who makes most impression is, however, the visitor, Miss Garford, or Garforth, I think."

"Oh! Mr. Strachan's secretary, who is staying in the house. Garth is the name, not Garford."

"Garth!" said Morrison, sitting suddenly erect. "Did you say Garth?"

"Why, do you know her? No relation of the General—I asked her."

"Some friends of mine," began Morrison, and paused. "Do you happen to know who she is, and where she comes from?" he asked.

"Sorry," said Mrs. Varick discouragingly, "I never heard of her until Mr. Strachan brought her to stay at Redmays."

"You haven't by chance heard her refer to the Trenby Hostel? It's a sort of residential club for ladies in London."

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"We can easily find out in the course of our travels," suggested the Major.

"Is she coming along? Good!" said Morrison, with satisfaction. "If she should be the girl I think she is—rather fun. I wonder!"

CHAPTER XII

IN TEESDALE

DEAR CLEM,—Your letter sounds horribly like a threat. You say that you have discovered my alias and will set detectives to trace me. But what, conceivably, could you gain by that? I imagine that it would not be hard to find me. And afterwards—what? You talk as if you could have me arrested, or brought to justice. But you *can't*! I have done nothing except try to put myself out of reach of your importunity; and I only did that after warning you very plainly.

“Let me write down once more, in so many words, my unalterable decision, *I will not marry you—ever.*

“I know I have taken back my word. I know we were engaged, and I have ended the engagement. I am ashamed of myself, but I don't regret what I did. You talk as if I had broken a marriage vow. Nothing of the kind. I have merely changed my mind before it was too late.

“I am quite certain Dad does not—cannot—know how you are behaving; unless you have got hold of Bertalda and enlisted her help to coerce the poor old man, as you have tried to coerce me! So far, I have not distressed him by telling him what

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you are making me endure; but I advise you gravely—don't push me too far.

"In a word, you have got to take me seriously. I am altogether in earnest. I am by no means destitute (as you suggest) of family feeling. I would do a great deal to keep the property together; but I stop short of making myself an Iphigenia. It is not solely selfishness which moves me—it is partly of you that I think; for if I were miserable in marriage, I should inevitably make you miserable too. You and I could never live together. Though we are of the same blood, your country is not my country, neither are your gods my gods. So please, Clem, don't annoy me any more, otherwise I may take steps which you will regret very much.—Your affectionate cousin, CHARIS OSBOURNE."

Miss Garth laid down her pen and sighed. She sat in that historic room in the King's Head, Barnard Castle, which is known as the Dickens room; and as it was Wednesday, which, as all the world knows, is market-day in "Barney," she gazed out over a scene of lively activity.

To her right the market house, where sat the farmers' wives, in from the Dales with their butter, cheese, poultry and eggs, was like a swarming hive, with busy customers popping in and out of every entrance. Before her, the long, narrow, uneven market-square was choked in the centre with every kind of vehicle, chiefly dog-carts and governess carts, but with a good sprinkling of "Fords"

—all lying idle while their owners bought and sold, ate and drank, or visited their lawyer and their bank. Had she known it, she was close to the scene of a wonderful war-feat; for it was here, in this market-place, that a young and beautiful girl during the war “carried on” a solicitor’s business for a dead father and absent brother. In those days, the hard-bitten farmers of the Dale found a pretext most market-days to “look in” upon their legal adviser! But that is another story.

Charis was alone in the Dickens room. She had begged to be left to finish Strachan’s correspondence, while the others went to investigate the market, to photograph the Norman door of the church, and to see the celebrated “Blagrove’s House,” where Cromwell lay one historic night.

Her business done, she had seized the chance to indite the letter here given; and she had barely finished, stamped and sealed it, when rapid footsteps were heard approaching, and Major Doran peeped in.

“Miss Garth—I’m sent to bring you to the Castle! Come along—you must see it—the view along the Tees is simply topping!”

The summons brought her back to the present moment in welcome fashion. Gladly she turned her thoughts from disagreeable preoccupations, and catching up her hat from the table, stood before the mirror to pin it on.

Doran, watching the performance, was approving the hat and its wearer. Since quitting the re-

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pressive influence of Streatwood and Mrs. Crans-toun-Brown, Charis had insensibly slackened slightly in her restraint, and ceased consciously to play the part of a salaried employee. "I'm just ready," she said joyously. "Will you collect that package of letters, please? We will put them in the box as we go down! What a gay old town this is, isn't it?"

"I expect it's not always as brisk as it is on market-days," said the Major, "but for natural beauty of situation, I know few towns to beat it. Have you a sunshade to protect that dinky hat? Come along!"

Together they issued into the sunny market-place; but, turning immediately to their left, passed under the inn, through what were once the outer courts of the mighty fortress built by Bernard de Balliol, to the entrance of the poor yet majestic remnant now standing. The rest of the party were awaiting them within the keep itself, where Sheila Varick, who was a great amateur photographer, was busy obtaining a snapshot of the raging river and high woods from the window. Gilbert Brown was helping her—he was a man who could do most things with his hands—and he had an unerring eye for the best view-point. Sheila was looking sweet, in her dainty linen gown, her face flushed with the interest and pleasure of the moment. For the last few years she had had no heart for life—no force for the gaiety natural to her; now, for the first time since her widowhood, this was returning.

"Ha!" said she, "here come Norman and Miss Garth! I really think that is a case, you know."

"Oh?" said Gilbert in his non-committal fashion.

"Well—look at him! And think of his usual manner with girls! I couldn't believe it at first."

"Why, because you thought he would look higher?"

"No, because I undervalued his taste," said she mischievously. "Miss Garth's style is a bit subtle, you know. I should not have felt certain of Norman's appreciating her."

"Would you be pleased, then, if——"

"If he had strength of mind to let it be known in Streatwood that he had succumbed to a nobody with nothing—speaking as the world speaks? Well, then, yes! I should. It would be very good for Norman to have to go through such an ordeal; and also I think very good for him to have a wife of such a calibre.

"You call her—subtle?"

"Well—don't you?"

"I'm no judge—of anything."

"Sorry to hear that. Have I then no grounds for pride when you praise my photographs?"

"I'm afraid not. I have no standards. I only know what I like."

"Your saying that shows that you might acquire standards?"

"Perhaps. But it's a long business. I expect I awoke too late——"

"Awoke?"

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"——and the atmosphere at Redmays is not stimulating to intellectual effort."

Mrs. Varick laughed, a delicious gurgling laugh, and looked at Gilbert with deep interest.

"It isn't exactly *intellect* that you have," said she musingly. "It's character. I think you are remarkable."

"So I am. Remarkably commonplace. I sometimes think I'm more like a whetstone than anything else—something for other people to sharpen their wits upon."

Her reply to this was lost in the sound of the advancing party, who now surged up the stairs from the guard-room, all of them talking at once.

"Mrs. Varick," said Strachan, "no more photography for the minute, please. You are coming with me to the top of the tower."

"Of course I am, you irresistible man! Or to the moon if you should so order it! Where," she went on as she followed him up the stair, "has your High Mightiness arranged for us to go this afternoon?"

"I have planned that we will go where you choose. But since the world is wide, I have taken the precaution of collecting a few alternatives to set before you. Ah—now! What do you think of that for a prospect?"

They had emerged from the narrow ascent in the thickness of the wall, to where the roofless, broken keep stands open to the day, with a few more pathetic steps, leading on, leading nowhither.

Strachan seated Mrs. Varick upon the topmost one and with a sweep of the arm bade her look around.

"The world," said she, with a sigh of pleasure, "is indeed wide."

There lay before her on the one hand the rolling slopes which run down toward the plain of York and the industrial towns. Beneath, the tumbling, rocky Tees was caught in the teeth of one black, wicked-looking mill before it streamed under the arches of the massive Tudor bridge which spans it just at the foot of Bernard's stronghold. Far away north and west the blue lines of the Pennines lifted like a heaving sea.

Strachan stared at the river. "I saw it once, in spate—don't ask me how many years ago. I was a little lad at the time. That year, the flood entered and destroyed some old slum houses that used to stand over there. It came down so sharply that it caught a man with a horse and cart upon the bridge itself. I didn't see that happen. . . . On the parapet of that same bridge is a dab of colour—red colour—which they renew every year, to mark the place where one dark night a man flung his sweetheart into the river and drowned her. . . . As you may have heard Vee reading out of the guide-book just now, the spectre of Richard the Third is supposed to haunt this castle. That window, with no chamber behind it, overlooking the river, was the window of his room. They say a light burns there, times, after dark. . . . When I was a boy I would slink out nights, in hopes I would see that ghastly

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glimmer. I never did. But there was an old man lived in Barney then, who swore to me that he had seen it."

"You make me feel the spell of the place," murmured Sheila, looking at him very sweetly. "I do like touring with you."

"I little thought then that I would one day be back here, with money enough to buy the borough," he mused on, aloud. "I longed for money then; and I have got it. But"—his voice broke oddly—"I have lost all the rest."

"I too," said Sheila heavily; and she laid warm, sympathetic fingers over his.

"Ah, but you are young—life is before you yet. I have made my throw, and lost it."

"Yet you're brave and unselfish enough to give others a pleasure which you can't altogether share."

"I will own, Mrs. Varick, that just now I am finding virtue to a very considerable extent its own reward," he broke in, with his twinkling glance of humour.

"Oh!" cried she suddenly, "look at Mr. Cranstoun-Brown! Is it safe?"

Strachan glanced up. Gilbert and Miss Garth were making the circuit of the keep, walking upon the broken masonry. He smiled.

"I don't think there's any danger, so long as one has a good head."

The Brown girls and the other two men were, however, of Mrs. Varick's opinion, and a chorus

of cries arose, Doran shouting to Gilbert rather peevishly not to allow Miss Garth to take risks.

"There's no question of permission, thanks, Major," cried Charis airily. "I do as I choose."

"On the contrary, Signorina," said Strachan in a carrying voice, "you do as *I* choose."

"Oh, yes! I acknowledge *your* authority, of course!"

"Good! Then run around as many towers as you choose, while you are still young and cool-headed."

"Such tosh! No danger at all," muttered Gilbert, giving her a hand down to the tiny gallery in which the rest of them were crowded.

"Is this afternoon's expedition decided?" inquired Morrison of Strachan.

"Well, Mrs. Varick hasn't yet given the word Go; but the suggestion before her is that the cars take us up the Durham side of Tees to the gate leading to High Shipley, said to have been a hunting-lodge of James II. There you shall see the bedstead upon which, so says tradition, the royal limbs reposed. After that, following the grass ride which was once the avenue of approach to the house, we will cross the Tees and ascend the bank, past Woden's Croft, to the Fairy Cupboards. There I trust we shall find Horn with the tea-baskets; and thence we will motor home."

Mrs. Varick sighed with bliss. "What a courier you would have made! And what an abode of enchantment this neighbourhood seems to be! Mys-

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terious lights in ruins—royal bedsteads—and what, oh, tell us, what are Fairy Cupboards?"

"They are, I am told, the result of the grinding together of stone and water. A big stone is washed down into a recess by the force of the current, and cannot escape, so it grinds round and round until it grinds itself a hole—like those *moulins* they show you in Lucerne."

"Would Fairy Cupboards be good places in which to store valuables, I wonder?" said Gilbert dreamily, speaking to nobody in particular.

"Let's try!" cried Vee. "We will each deposit a treasured wish in one of the Cupboards, and see what the fairies do with it!"

"They are presumably Norse fairies," chimed in Morrison, "so near to Woden's Croft, and Thor's Gill——"

"And just at the mouth of Baldur's Dale," eagerly put in Charis. "The Danes must have taken possession pretty thoroughly in Teesdale."

"The place is chock-full of history, right along," said the gratified Strachan. "I felt sure you would all like it."

"Cousin George, don't let us be in too great a hurry to get to Aunt Nicholson's," entreated Vee. "Time enough to arrive when this weather breaks."

"Well, it seems your aunt can't do with us just yet awhile," was the reply, as he took a letter from his pocket. "Their house is vurry small; they can only put up myself and the two girls. The rest of

you must go to the inn at Fratton Beck, and they have no room for us there for a full week."

"Good biz!" cried everybody, in a kind of chorus.

"And so say all of us!" sang Vee, as a move was made by evacuating the keep. The others took up the refrain, and a smile of real pleasure and gratification mantled the face of the millionaire, as, in the grassy court below, he bowed his acknowledgments.

* * * * *

The afternoon proved as cloudlessly fair as the morning had been; and the river valley was at its most bewitching as they descended, through a steep green wood, to the boulder-strewn curve of shore where Horn, the chauffeur, with the tea-hampers awaited them.

The young men took off their shoes and waded over the shelf-like rocks to obtain a better view of the curious pot-holes known as Fairy Cupboards; which really are a good deal like the ambries one finds in old church walls. Vee and Charis both followed their example, to the annoyance of Phyllis, who suffered badly from corns, and could not show her feet. Poor Phyllis! She would have died rather than admit how hard she found it to fit in with the rest of the party. Like her mother, she had no sense of humour, and, could she have found someone to sentimentalise with her, would sooner have used these romantic spots as excuses for flirtation. She made the attempt in turn with all the gentlemen of the party, only to be met with what she described to herself as "that eternal ragging."

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In full hearing of Miss Garth, she told Veronica that she was ashamed of her—messing about like a tripper; and was vexed that the secretary gave no sign of either hearing or heeding what she said.

Vee merely retorted that she was in the same happy position as Mr. Albert Henry Bivvens, having been given leave to paddle by her Daddy Strachan; and as Phyllis was the sole member of the party who did not know her "Just-so Stories," she once more felt herself isolated and aggrieved.

"I say, Miss Garth, you've left your shoes and stockings in rather a damp place!" called Doran.

"Please put them into safety for me," cried back the girl, who had ventured right across the river with the help of Gilbert. The Major daintily picked up the heap of feminine trifles—a little bag, gloves, footwear and handkerchief. A puff of air caught the latter and blew it upon Colonel Morrison's knee, as he sat by Sheila Varick.

"Who's the owner of this very pretty thing?" he asked, picking it up. "Ah! Initials in the corner here: C. O. Which of us does that fit, eh?"

"It's Miss Garth's handkerchief," said the Major, clambering over to him to reclaim it.

Morrison whistled softly. A curious look crossed his face, and he arched his brows. "Bit of a give-away, that," he murmured.

"What's the matter?" asked Sheila in a low voice, arrested by his expression.

"Well, Madame, I'm afraid I can't tell you. It's a very curious bit of confirmation of a suspicion I

have had ever since the beginning of this tour. I'm wondering whether, though I mustn't tell you, I ought to feel myself bound to tell somebody else."

"I'm half dead with curiosity—but, Colonel, I tell you plainly—if you say or do anything to disturb the harmony of this party, I'll never forgive you!"

"Precisely my own feeling. Especially since the young lady in question is not, so far as I know, trying to hide anything to her own discredit. If I'm right about her—and I'm practically certain I am—it's exactly the contrary. . . . So I believe, for the present, I'll let things slide—shall I?"

CHAPTER XIII

CHANGING PARTNERS

EARLY summer is the hey-day of the north. The wealth of wild flowers, the carpets of primrose and blue-bell in the woods, the white mist of bird-cherry and hawthorn bloom, made it seem an enchanted land.

Charis was finding the days quite unexpectedly agreeable. Major Doran, his sister, and the Colonel, were all interesting—the Major amusing, the Colonel cultivated, and Mrs. Varick witty. Gilbert Brown was taciturn, but when he spoke, it was to the point; while Veronica, though jarring at times, was occasionally almost brilliant. In short, the fly in the ointment was the elder Miss Brown; and she, never intentionally comic, was unintentionally so, in the persistent clumsiness with which she set herself to woo George Strachan, the object of her attentions being not only unconscious of them, but also the sole member of the party who remained so.

He thought Phyllis a good sort of girl, stupid, and somewhat outclassed by the nimble wits of the others; and in his anxiety that she should not feel out of it, there was, it must be owned, some emphasis laid upon the distinguished kindness which

he showed her; and this, in her conceit, she accepted as a sign that he meant to make her his wife.

Looking upon him as her own property, she was resenting, every day more definitely, the tender kind of intimacy which existed, beyond doubt, between Strachan and his secretary. Phyllis told herself that he would be altogether hers were it not for the machinations of Miss Garth. She never lost a chance of snubbing or contradicting Charis, often in the hearing of the others.

Her venom grew each hour more difficult to hide, as each completed day of their tour found her still short of the goal it was so essential she should reach.

One morning, Vee, opening a letter from their mother, took out an enclosure, glanced at the address, and tossed it across the breakfast-table to Phyllis, with a meaning glance.

"Look out, Phyl," said she warningly. "I wonder Ma didn't open that."

Phyl, with one of her deep, purplish blushes, took the letter and stuffed it into her little bag. "Nonsense," said she tartly.

"Well, I advise you to do something about it," returned Vee in an irritating manner; and Charis wondered what was behind. The commercial-shaped envelope seemed to contain a bill.

All that day Phyllis stuck to her cousin with a persistence which at last wearied even his good temper.

"Try," said he to Charis after lunch, "to get Phyl put into the other car for a change, will you? I

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have had her company ever since I got up this morning, and I'm about through with her. She's a good enough girl, but it's like carrying about a tame echo—ditto to everything I say. Wearisome."

It was so seldom his patience gave out, that Charis determined it should be as he desired. But she got no opening to make the suggestion, though she was occupied with schemes for bringing it about. At last, finding that she was powerless, single-handed to detach the devoted follower, she determined to apply to Gilbert for help. They were spending the day in Richmond, had lunched at the hotel, and were making the round of the castle ruins.

They had all crowded into the diminutive chapel in the outer wall, where is still the stone slab which once served for an altar, and the remains of the carving above the arcaded seats around the wall. Gilbert lingered within when the rest emerged, studying the light; and Charis seized her chance.

"Mrs. Varick," he was remarking, "wants this photographed; but there's no light. It would need a longish time-exposure."

"Offer to do it for her," murmured the girl quickly. "I'll stay and help. I want to ask you something."

He raised his eyes to hers with the steady, earnest look he always gave her; and after a just perceptible moment in which he let her wish sink in, as it were, he said quietly: "Right. I'll fetch the tripod."

When he returned, bringing the camera, she sat niched in one of the arched recesses.

"I'd like a picture of you there—like that," he remarked, in contemplation; and his face was that of a votary.

"No—not here," she cut in quickly. "Don't spoil the dignity of this beautiful place like that."

He smiled with a quiet relish as he adjusted his instrument. "I like to watch your face when you are in these places," he said. "You are so far away. More than once I have addressed you and you haven't heard. I know you are back in the times when this place was in full going order."

"You know that? But how?"

"Set a thief to catch a thief. It's because I'm like that myself."

She laughed in triumph. "Aha! Then you can sympathise! But you are such a moderate minded person."

"Am I?"

"You seem so! Now I am conscious of a craving so violent that I'm quite ashamed of it, to glimpse one of these places as it used to be. . . . Those passage-ways in the wall, that now look out on vacancy . . . think of the slinking, at dead of night, of some caitiff man-at-arms, on his way to show a signal light to the enemy! Or some trembling lady, thinking she heard the hoofs of her returning lord's steed in the great courtyard. . . . Oh, picture the gateway, humming with life—churls bringing in country produce—beggars, harpers, strolling players—pedlars with packs full of the materials for ladies' work . . . and the great

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kitchen, where perhaps some captive enemy turned the spit—the good cheer, and heat and smoke and dirt. . . .”

“Yes, I have often thought of it,” he said, “and of how different it all was, and yet how like to what goes on nowadays——”

She broke in: “Yes! Yes! That is it! They were so restricted according to our thinking—I mean the women, of course—and yet they must have had a good deal of fun that we miss nowadays. If they had no theatres, on the other hand, few weeks passed without a company of strolling players, who gave a performance for their sole benefit! If there were no shops to which they could go, at least they had the amusement of having the shops come to them—and every pedlar brought news of what was happening miles and miles away! If the society was limited, at least you were never without it—every castle had its own retinue, every lady her maids of honour, every lord his knights. . . . Sometimes I think the feudal system came near to being the best form of government we have hit upon hitherto.”

“But it would be of no use to try and restore it now—it’s gone, never to return,” said he slowly and as though he were considering the possibility.

“Ah, no use—to ‘revive old customs thoroughly worn out, the souls of them fumed forth, the hearts of them torn out!’ ”

“If one could buy an island,” mused he. “An island about the size of Corsica—and start there—

but I expect you are right—it would be only acting—self-conscious mimicry—like the modern efforts after simplicity and sandals—loathsome posing.”

“Have you wanted the island?” she asked meditatively.

“Always. Some place where there was no hired army, but where every citizen must bear arms to defend his home if necessary. Oh, I’m a deplorable ass! I believe the division of labour is the root of all evil. I think it would be a better world if every man could lay bricks and carve wood and hunt game and teach Latin and make laws. . . .”

“. . . And every woman could bake bread and spin wool and embroider, and sing and play and dance. . . . Oh reactionary!”

They laughed into each other’s eyes.

“No lady secretaries,” she suggested, “unless some maid attired herself as a youth and boldly went forth to seek her fortune!”

“Thanks,” he replied dryly, “that decides it. No world for me in which there are no lady secretaries.”

“Do you know we are talking regrettable nonsense,” said Charis hastily, “and time is slipping by, and I forgot that I decoyed you here to try and get something out of you—to ask you to contrive something for me——”

“Right-o! What is it?” he asked tranquilly, accepting the change of subject.

“Mr. Strachan wants a change of lady in his car,” said she. “I fancy he thinks Mrs. Varick would like

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to be invited to sit by him for the afternoon. That place has belonged to Miss Cranstoun-Brown ever since we started, and I want you to devise some way of meeting his wishes without hurting her feelings. Could you persuade Major Doran to invite her to come with him? She would like that, but I don't feel that I dare ask him. Yet it has been left to me—I feel I ought to do it if I can."

"It needs doing," said Gilbert bluntly. "Phyllis is making herself and Strachan ridiculous. If it isn't stopped she will begin to believe the car belongs to her. I'll see to it."

"Without hurting her feelings?" earnestly put in Charis. "I am sure she has no idea that she is monopolising her host unduly—but Mr. Strachan realises he has a duty to the rest of the party."

"Leave it to me," was the reply, hardly uttered before the careful Phyllis, who had been strictly enjoined by her mamma never to allow flirtation between Gilbert and Miss Garth, ran into the chapel, and had to be forcibly caught and held by her brother to prevent the ruin of a photo.

"What a blundering donkey you are, Phyll!" was his fraternal amenity, to which she replied:

"Blundering donkey yourself! What are you about here in this dark hole? The others are leaving—they couldn't think what had become of you."

"Keep to facts. Mrs. Varick knew I was here. I am doing this job for her."

"Well, but I mean Miss Garth. Does she know she is keeping Mr. Strachan waiting?"

The girl's manner was full of insolence, and the fact that Charis was quite unmoved, either by the information or the way in which it was conveyed, annoyed her to the point of indiscretion.

"If you had heard what Mr. Strachan said just now about your being out of the way when you were wanted," said she, "you might hurry a little. You've got a delightful post, Miss Garth—don't you want to keep it?"

Charis, who had stooped to tie a shoelace, and also partly to hide a smile, raised her face, devoid of expression, and stared steadily at Phyllis's brick-red countenance. "I beg your pardon?" said she, as though she had not heard.

Meeting her calm eyes, Phyllis simply dared not repeat her impertinence. She grew still more scarlet and tossed her head.

"Gilbert," said she, "you must come at once—it is so ill-bred to make people wait for you."

"Ah, you're an authority on breeding, aren't you?" was his ironic answer as he placed the cap upon the camera and put his watch back in his pocket.

Phyllis snorted and flounced away, enraged. Charis, watching her, felt sure that the girl had something on her mind.

When the camera was packed up Gilbert and she went their unhurried way towards the gate, reaching it before the rest of the party who were leisurely making the tour of the walls. Charis saw Gilbert go up to Major Doran and talk to him for a minute

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or two. Then she saw the Major approach Phyllis and evidently press her to come and sit by him in his car. He drove himself, Strachan's man having undertaken the cleaning of both cars, and the Major taking the chance to give his own chauffeur a holiday.

In the other car, by universal insistence, Strachan sat in the best place in the tonneau facing forwards. Hitherto Phyllis had usurped the place beside him as if it were her right. She was evidently flattered, however, at Doran's invitation, and presently ran up to her cousin and cried that she was torn two ways—Major Doran said they were going up to Reeth, the loveliest drive in England, and he wanted to hear what she said at first sight of it. Would Cousin George forgive her desertion?

Cousin George cheerfully said that he thought it was far better to change partners than always to be seated the same way. "I have no right to monopolise you, my dear," said he kindly; "the young men should have a chance."

Phyllis turned up her eyes languishingly to him. "No young man could have a *real* chance where *you* are concerned," said she fatuously and not very felicitously. Strachan laughed outright, with his merry eyes fixed upon his secretary.

"My dear," said he as soon as Phyllis had moved away, "I am obliged to you. I will ask Mrs. Varick to sit in Phyllis's place and Colonel Morrison wants to sit with us and be amused. Vee has begged to sit by Horn, as he is teaching her to drive. But

that will leave you and Gil to travel together behind the Major and Phyllis."

"I shan't mind that," said Charis quickly; and afterwards wondered at herself that this was so.

CHAPTER XIV

PHYLLIS AND FINANCE

NEXT morning, during the half-hour set apart each day for Mr. Strachan to go through his letters with his secretary, he had occasion to send Miss Garth down to the sitting-room of the hotel, to search for a Canadian newspaper which he had mislaid. He was a little worried that morning—it seemed to him, judging from his correspondence, that things were not going as smoothly in Ontario as he had hoped might be the case in his absence.

His perturbation gave Charis an idea. She thought she saw her way to make a suggestion which would be advantageous at the same time to herself, to Gilbert Brown, and to Strachan. She knew that the sooner Gilbert was taken completely out of her way, the better for him. It would be much more comfortable for everybody if she could prevent things from coming to a point—if she could head off her big, blundering suitor without exposing him to the mortification of a refusal. She thought highly of the young man's common sense, and also of his honesty, and was confident that he could be of great use to his cousin if Strachan could be brought to see it.

Her mind was deeply occupied with this notion

as she swiftly and silently entered the room. At that time of day the place was fairly certain to be empty; and she started, when, standing before the table which held the papers, she heard from behind her the sound of a smothered but unmistakable sob.

Facing round, she saw Phyllis seated in a corner, behind a curtain, at a small writing-table. She was crouched together with her handkerchief to her eyes; and as she approached, Charis saw that a sheet of the hotel paper lay before her, and a letter which seemed to be the one her mother had sent on to her the previous day.

Charis was confirmed in her notion that something was wrong where this girl was concerned. All the previous day she had been in a state of unnatural, almost hectic excitement. During the entire forenoon, she had flung herself openly and desperately at Strachan's head; and in the afternoon she had done the same to Major Doran. Poor Phyllis! She belonged to the class of girl—more numerous than is realised—to whom any man who proposes is the right man. She was not entirely false, except in so far that she was self-deceived. The mere fact of a man's asking her to marry him would persuade her that she adored him—would, in fact, probably be sufficient to *make* her adore him in a sort of rapture of gratitude for the time being. She had no deep feeling, but she imagined herself to be an extremely romantic, emotional being. Her mistakes were laughable, but they were also pitiable, and in Charis compassion came uppermost, as she

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crossed the room and approached the forlorn figure.

"Miss Cranstoun-Brown, I'm afraid you are not well?"

Phyllis started so violently as to make it apparent that her abandonment of misery, in a public sitting-room, was genuine and not calculated. She must then be very hard hit.

"Couldn't I get you anything?" suggested Charis diffidently.

"Certainly not. Go away," stammered the girl resentfully; but the truculence of the rejoinder was washed out by a rush of blinding tears and some angry sobbing. "My own sister won't help me, so is it likely that you could?" she blurted out dolorously.

"Then you are in trouble? Isn't there something—anything—one could do?"

"Not you, is it likely? If I don't know where to turn for money, you don't suppose I should come to you for it," was the hardly audible, though envenomed answer.

"Are you—are you—in debt?" hazarded Charis, expecting to be told to leave the room at once. But the young woman, who, according to her mother, would make a perfect wife, was in so abject a position that she was ready to catch at any straw, even the sympathy of the girl she would like to trample upon.

"You can't understand, of course," she muttered, between tears, "what a girl in my position has to meet in the way of expenses; and—and I've never

had a proper dress allowance in my life! I live in a good house, I have plenty of food, but in reality I'm a genteel pauper! I can't go and buy a pair of shoes without dunning either my father or my mother for a pound to pay for them. Well! You can guess what happens. Of course I go on tick. It—it was just my bad luck that I had run up a long score at one of the shops—these beasts, Hardy and Trip—in Streatwood High Street, just at the time that Cousin George suggested this tour. Then there were all kinds of things I had to have—long coat, motor-veils, hats, gloves, smart shoes! One can't go about a fright, and Ma gave me about enough to buy one cheap frock! She thinks girls should go in for simple white muslin! Ugh! You know what a price things are, since the war. I only ordered what I simply had to have; and now, though the whole bill isn't much over twenty pounds, they threaten to apply to Mother unless I pay at once. . . ."

"Well—but wouldn't that be the best way?"

"You don't know—what—Ma—is! Nobody except those who have to live with her know what Ma is! I tell you I often think I'd marry a road-sweeper, just to get away from her tyranny and her tongue! If—if she knew I'd run up a bill like this, I don't know what she'd do!"

"But—but what made you—how did you ever think you were going to pay it?" demanded Charis curiously.

"Why, of course—I should have thought you

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could see—I should have thought everybody would see, that it's only a question of time—Cousin George."

"You think you could ask him to pay your debts?"

"Of course I could, if—if—— Oh, you needn't look so bewildered! You must have seen it from the first—from the way he looked at me when he walked into our drawing-room. I had on a really pretty frock, and shoes and stockings to match—and I had had my hair marcel-waved and shampooed—that blued all the money Ma doled out for silk stockings! But you see it answered—men like something showy"—Phyllis suddenly came to a choking pause in this remarkable piece of self-revelation. "Ugh!" cried she furiously, "if it hadn't been for you, I should be engaged to him by now!"

Remembering her own complicity in the shifting of Phyllis's place in the car the previous day Charis coloured hotly. "Miss Cranstoun-Brown, what can you mean?"

The tone was so studiously gentle and gravely reproachful that, for a wonder, Phyllis, vain and stupid though she was, caught a part of its significance. "Oh," she groaned, "I hardly know what I'm saying. All I know is that I daren't go to Gil, and that Vee won't help with a penny . . . and if I can't send this money, I'm in a worse hole than ever I was in my life! But why on earth am I telling *you* all this? Of course, you'd be delighted if Ma was to write and order me straight home!"

"I wonder why you think so? Have I ever made myself objectionable to you?" asked Charis quietly. "I have often wondered why you should feel hostile to me. I know you despise me for having to earn my living—but at least that keeps me from such difficulties as yours of this moment. However, I am very sorry for your trouble, and I will help you if you allow me. Mr. Strachan has lately paid my salary, and I can lend you the money to pay this bill—I will lend it—on certain conditions."

"Conditions?" Between her consuming anxiety for relief and her humiliation that it should come from such a quarter, the sufferer almost choked.

"You must understand that it is a loan, and that it must be repaid the first moment you are able. I mean, when you get some money, you must pay me back before contracting any fresh debts. Do you agree to that?"

The tears began to flow afresh. "I'm not likely to get any more money for ever so long—unless——"

"Well, I'll risk that. I am going to trust you."

The purplish, mottled face was lifted to see if this incredible offer were genuine. "You'll lend me—twenty-three pounds?"

"Yes. I happen to have it on me. Not a very usual occurrence, as you may guess."

Charis took out her purse, extracted thence four five-pound notes, and three one-pound treasury notes, and pushed them across the table. There was a momentary hesitation, but it was soon over. With

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a long breath of almost suffocating gratitude the notes were accepted, amid muttered thanks, and something which almost sounded like an apology.

Charis caught—"been mistaken in you—shall always look upon you as a friend—perhaps I shall pay this back sooner than you think. . . ."

She cut short the confused utterance. "I must run, or I shall have Mr. Strachan asking where I have been wasting my time."

Phyllis's face was suddenly drained of all colour. "Oh! You wouldn't tell him?"

Charis met her eyes. "No, I will not tell him—so long as you observe my conditions; and remember that you are in honour pledged to repay me as soon as you can."

Waiting for no more gratitude, she ran swiftly from the room. Phyllis sat staring at the wad of notes before her, and her face began to regain some of its wonted assurance.

She ran her eyes over the bill. Some of the items were eighteen months old. Her expression became absorbed—eager. She lifted her eyes to make sure that Miss Garth had gone right out of the room, and that she was alone. Then she took up her pen and began to write.

"DEAR SIR,—I am now enclosing fifteen pounds on account of your bill, trusting that you will wait a few weeks for the balance. In that time I shall be back in town, and I expect that I shall be giving a very large order.

"In acknowledging receipt of enclosed money (£15) please address not to Redmays, but to Fratton Beck Hotel, Estondale."

* * * * *

Charis brought the required paper to Strachan, and the remainder of their morning's work was quickly settled.

"And now," said she, "if you will give me ten minutes, I have somewhat to say unto thee, O Arbiter of Destiny."

"Arbiter of Destiny! I like that title better than Good Samaritan. It tickles me, some. Say on, young woman."

"I want you to do two things for me."

"I think it's unlikely I shall refuse."

"Ah, wait—till you hear the second. The first I am fairly sure you will like to do. I have a particular reason for suggesting it. I wonder if you know that your two young cousins, the Brown girls, are in a state of chronic hard-upness? In England, people don't consider their daughters' purses—even now, after the war and everything, the English middle-class girl at home has no money unless she earns it. Vee does earn some, but not much. It may sound to you odd that on a trip like this, where you pay for all, these girls should be short of cash; but they are; and you understand—going from one town to another—they would like to buy things to take home, and so on. . . . So, after this lengthy preamble, what I want you to do is to give each of them

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fifty pounds, and say it is for them to spend as they like best—not to save up and invest.”

“It’s an excellent idea, and shall be carried out, Mademoiselle.”

“Don’t do it to-day, nor to-morrow. In a few days we visit Carlisle, don’t we? That will be an excuse—the shops there—I don’t want them to think that I put you up to it. And—oh, yes; one other thing, this important—give it to them both at the same time—have them both in the room together. Don’t let either think she is preferred to the other.”

He smiled with comprehension. “Agreed again. And now?”

“Now I come to the important thing. I want you to offer to take Gilbert Brown into your business in Ontario, and to dispatch him off there at once.”

He showed his surprise at this by a long silence and a searching look. “So-o-o! That is a tall order. Do you want to be rid of the young man, at my expense?”

She would have liked to conceal her deep blush, but found it impossible. “I am thinking of both you and him,” she maintained. “You want me to give you the result of my observations. One of the things I have found out is, as I told you the other day, that that young man is spoiling for an object in life. Give him some real important work, I don’t mind guaranteeing that he will do it well. I ordered you to have a heart-to-heart talk with him, and you

haven't done as I told you, which is very refractory of you. Do it now. Talk to him without delay. I believe with all my heart that he is the man you want, and that you are the man he wants."

"Alas, my dear, I fear greatly—that you are the woman he wants, and, of course, I know he is *not* the man you want."

Charis faced him with eyes full of regrets. "I—I fear you may be right. I want you to know that I couldn't help it. I haven't consciously done anything . . . but as you say, of course, he is not the man I want . . . and it would be better for him to go right away, to fresh surroundings and fresh interests. Oh, dear, this sounds dreadful. Indeed, I am not asking you to employ him just because I want to be rid of him. Oh, do believe it isn't that. I hoped you had not seen . . . but you are so abominably penetrating. Ah, don't look at me like that!"

"Abominably penetrating, am I?" he echoed with a queer intonation. "Well, I believe I *am* more or less clear-sighted—where I love."

She gave him what he inly termed her golden smile. "I never met a man like you," she murmured gratefully. "I don't believe you could ever possibly misunderstand."

"Sometimes I wish I could," said George Strachan enigmatically.

CHAPTER XV

A NEAR SHAVE

IT had been decided that, in order to fill in the time which must elapse before they could be received at the Fratton Beck Hotel, the party should make a few days' tour in Lakeland. Strachan had a confidential talk with his secretary and succeeded in ascertaining exactly which bit of country she would wish to avoid, and having arranged his itinerary accordingly, they finally left Barnard Castle one sunshiny morning and passed over Stainmore, by way of Brough and Appleby, to Pooley Bridge and thence along the Helvellyn side of Ullswater to Patterdale. Here they lunched and set out, about three o'clock in the afternoon, to cross the Kirkstone Pass to Ambleside.

Charis had not found leisure for a word with Gilbert Brown that day, but she knew he had had a long talk with his cousin the previous night. She was anxious to know if anything had been arranged, and she felt he was equally anxious to tell her something. All the morning they had travelled in separate cars, he being with Mrs. Varick, while Miss Garth most unwillingly played number three with Strachan and Phyllis. She felt that an afternoon of the same ordeal would be unbearable, and was

grateful indeed to Major Doran when he once more came to the rescue and claimed Miss Cranstoun-Brown as his companion over the pass.

Gilbert seized the chance thus offered. "I want to talk to you," said he under his breath to Charis. "It's really important. Come with me again in Doran's car."

She hesitated. "Oh, but you would like to have Mrs. Varick."

He smiled sarcastically. "Not she! Look at her, making tracks for the magnet. If you remember, I prophesied that we other men should have a thin time if Strachan were here."

"It doesn't seem quite fair that he should be so fascinating as well as so rich, does it?" she admitted. "He is the most compelling person I know. He just says Do, and you do it. I wish he could suddenly lose all his fortune—just to see if he would be as magnetic without it."

"Don't you go wishing such a thing as that or you put a spoke in my wheel altogether."

"Indeed? How so?"

"That's just what I want to explain if you will condescend to endure my company for an hour or so this afternoon."

"What of Colonel Morrison?"

"He always follows Mrs. Varick about—I'm of the opinion that Cousin George would as soon be without him. But, however, you see——"

Charis glanced towards the car and saw that both Vee and Colonel Morrison were taking their places,

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facing the others, in the capacious and comfortable interior of Strachan's car. They were talking volubly and evidently quite content to be together; so there seemed really no alternative for her unless she left Gilbert to sit alone and installed herself beside Horn.

She gave in, therefore, divided between the sense of insecurity she always felt in Gilbert's company and her desire to hear what had passed between him and his cousin.

It was a day to uplift the very heart in gladness at the surrounding beauty. The tree-covered slopes which dip so sharply to the lake were in the freshness of June verdure; and thus early in the season the terrible chars-à-bancs, which ply in the narrow, winding road and make August travel a terror, were not yet in full blast.

Gilbert began abruptly, as they slipped smoothly along the curve which heads Ullswater and turns up to Brothers Water. "Here is my news. Cousin George has asked me if I will go out to Canada for him, and I have told him that I will."

She turned to him a face of such radiant delight as he, apparently, had not anticipated. "Oh, good!" cried she fervently. "Good indeed!"

Gilbert swallowed hard and tried again. "He wants me to go at once, directly, even before the end of this tour—he would like me to be off as soon as we obtain my father's sanction."

He was gazing on her so appealingly that she felt embarrassed. Evidently he was taken aback at her

unconcealed pleasure in his imminent departure. She plunged on. "Indeed I am glad—glad for you both. I know Mr. Strachan has been uneasy, and your going will set his mind at rest. Must you wait, even for Mr. Brown's sanction?"

"As to my father," he said slowly, "I think I told you I'm in his office at present. I don't for a moment suppose he will stand in my way, but we must just let him know before leaving him in the lurch."

"Of course, how stupid of me. Well, I do congratulate you. This is what you hoped would happen, isn't it?—what I hoped would happen——"

"That I should go away?" He was trying hard to make his voice sound normal.

"Well, you could hardly enter the business at Ontario without going away, could you? I thought it was your great ambition."

"No rose without a thorn. You'll be thinking me ungrateful, but I can't help reflecting that Canada is a long way off."

"It is, of course. But, as you say, there must always be some drawback to everything."

"And, after all, what does it matter?" he murmured bitterly. "I am the kind of person who never will be missed."

"I don't think you ought to say such a thing as that! Your mother, of course——"

"Oh, of course!" It was almost a sneer.

"Well," she went on after pausing. "I own to feeling a bit disappointed. You spoke to me so strongly of your dissatisfaction with things as they

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were, I was under the impression that this was just the start you required."

"Cymon, in fact, goes away to his sheepfolds and the king's daughter back to her father's court."

It seemed to Charis that this was the kind of remark to which no reply was possible. She made a desperate effort to change the conversation.

"In our excitement over your promotion we mustn't forget to admire the scenery. Oh, do look! There goes the road right over our heads! How fast the cars rush down! Do you see that one? Coming down now—towards us? It is lurching very oddly—surely it's travelling too fast for safety! Oh, do you think the driver has lost control?"

As she spoke the car which had been visible at its height above them on the twisting road rounded a corner in its descent and plunged out of sight. Gilbert, springing forward, put his head round the corner of the wind-screen, and shouted to Doran:

"Look out! Car just round the bend coming down much too fast."

The Major at once slowed down, steering in close against the side of the road, and at the same instant the disabled car came lurching round the bend above them, with the passengers huddled together, evidently sensible of their danger, and the driver white as ashes, his face set grim and tense.

In the moment which elapsed between its coming into sight and the inevitable collision there was no time to jump, neither was jumping possible, since

Doran's car was pushed in close against the mountain side.

Charis felt herself snatched up bodily, so that her feet might not be pinned between the seats, and knew that Gilbert's sturdy frame and muscular arms were interposed between herself and the shock of the coming crash.

The jarring thud of impact was intermingled with the shrill yelps and squeals of feminine tourists, and the running tinkle of shattered glass. Something heavy fell into the tonneau, striking Gilbert on the back; but nothing touched Charis except his arms. The car remained upright, the collision driving its back wheels into the hillside bank, but not overturning it. All the air seemed full of sound and struggling; and for a few bewildering seconds, Miss Garth's heart stood still.

She then heard Gilbert's voice, close to her ear.

"Are you all right?" it asked in a forced, unnatural way.

"Yes — perfectly — please . . . please let me go. . . ."

"Of course. But I must move with care. There is at least one body on top of me, if not more."

"O-oh!"

"Don't get rattled. I think and hope they fell pretty soft."

His reluctant arms slowly withdrew their hold. "Don't move till I tell you," said he, twisting himself sideways, so as not too violently to dislodge the elderly female who was spread-eagled upon his back.

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As he carefully and with some pain disengaged himself, he emitted a curious sound; and Charis, breathing hard and trembling murmured: "Oh, Mr. Brown, are you laughing?"

"I'm most awfully sorry . . . but somehow it does seem funny. I fancy the dear creature has fainted from shock. Now if I hold her up, can you creep from under? Mind the broken glass; they've shattered our wind-screen."

Charis sidled sideways, and Gilbert, by an adroit manœuvre, deposited the limp lady beside her on the seat of the car, and rose to his feet.

"Anybody hurt?" he called.

George Strachan, pale with apprehension, was hurrying up the road from the point where his own car had been stopped. He surveyed, with a horrified air, the heap of people and vehicles blocking the highway.

"Where's my little girl?" he demanded of Gilbert, in hoarse peremptory tones.

Gilbert without a word turned to Charis, stooped, lifted her bodily, and handed her out over the back of the car to his cousin, who received her with a choked "Thank God!"

"Why, dear man, I'm as right as rain," cried Charis, struggling to her feet and taking Strachan's hands in hers. "Cheer up! The folks in the other car have got the worst of it."

"All that broken glass," he muttered, his colour beginning very gradually to return. "Child, if anything had happened to you, I would have decided

once for all that I'm a Jonah, and that, as soon as anything becomes dear to me, that something is doomed."

"Oh, rubbish," she answered playfully, patting his hand to reassure him. "You are never going to have those morbid fancies any more—you know you promised me!"

She was smiling up into his face, thinking only of his anxiety, desirous only to calm it. But to him, the revulsion of relief craved expression, and he bent down and kissed her forehead, repeating softly his "Thank God! Thank God!"

"How lovely of you to care so much," said the girl impulsively; and a thrill of joy passed through her as she felt the vibration of the arm he passed about her shoulders.

"If you have, or can beg, borrow or steal any brandy, Cousin George"—Gilbert spoke from within the car, where he was trying to restore the elderly female to consciousness.

Even as he spoke, Doran turned from his seat, where he had been bending over Phyllis, and spoke through the ruins of the wind-screen. "Yes, for pity's sake get some brandy," said he; "send your car down to the Brothers Water Inn, and ask them for some rags and so on. If all the men get together, I think they can pull this car off us. There's a child down there among the wheels."

Strachan, smitten with the thought of his own selfishness, became at once the man of resource and action. He hurried off to execute Doran's requests.

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Neither of the cars had been overturned. The one which had caused the accident was a privately owned char-à-banc, not very large as such vehicles go, but holding a dozen passengers. It was carefully driven, and, had the road been a little wider, the catastrophe might have been averted. The trouble was that, by one of those detestable coincidences which occur perhaps once in a lifetime, two of the tyres had punctured at the same time, so that it was impossible to control the steering. The driver had done all he could by shutting off the engine; but the weight of the car and the terrible steepness of the hill made disaster inevitable.

The shock had sent three of the passengers flying over the front; the lady who had landed upon Gilbert, the child who had fallen into the road, and an elderly gentleman, who was seriously hurt. The remainder retained their places, and a youngish lady, sitting on the side nearest Major Doran's car, was watching with the keenest attention Strachan's greeting of Charis, and his thankfulness for her safety.

"Why, surely, don't I know that girl?" said she reflectively to her mother, who sat beside her. "Surely that's Lord Ringland's daughter, Charis Osbourne, isn't it?"

Her mother merely moaned for answer; and, after trying eau-de-Cologne in vain, the daughter rose, succeeded in making her way out of the vehicle on the other side, and went on a pilgrimage for brandy.

By this time a crowd was collecting. Messengers had been sent up and down the pass to warn on-coming traffic; and almost all the travellers in the approaching carriages were alighting and hurrying to the scene of the accident.

With the help of so many volunteers, the interlocked cars were drawn clear of one another. Major Doran's had suffered considerably. The wind-screen was a wreck, the metal part of the bonnet crushed and battered, and the off front wheel was badly bent. There was, however, no injury to the engine, and an inquiry was instituted with a view to seeing whether she could be driven back as far as Patterdale.

All the men were absorbed in these matters, and the ladies forgathered by the roadside, clean handkerchiefs and restoratives being eagerly offered. Phyllis had been cut on the arm by a big splinter of glass, having wisely raised both arms to screen her face. It was a long cut, which bled a good deal, and her party impatiently awaited the return of their other car from the Brothers Water Inn—which was but a very little way down—in order to have her driven as fast as possible to a doctor.

Poor Phyllis! She was divided in her mind between self-pity and exultation in the injury which was making her the centre of attraction. The copious tears she was shedding were the result not of the pain she was suffering, but of the fact that Strachan was at the moment too much absorbed in the accident and its results to pay any attention to

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her. Surely no results could be so serious to him as her own cuts and bruises! There was that demure Miss Garth with literally not a scratch! It was very unfair! Why had she been silly enough to give up her own safe seat beside dear Cousin George for the glittering peril of the other car?

A youngish woman in a long motoring-coat strolled slowly past the group. She stopped, looked searchingly at Miss Garth, and stood there for a long moment, hesitating. At last she made up her mind and spoke.

"Surely I am not mistaken. Isn't that Miss Osbourne?"

They all looked up, but nobody answered. "I mean you," said she uncertainly, indicating Charis. "I am young Mrs. Hunter, the doctor's wife at Ringland."

"You are making a mistake. My name is Garth," said Charis quietly.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon. I don't know Miss Osbourne very well, but the likeness is remarkable," said young Mrs. Hunter, turning away apologetically.

Sheila Varick was conscious of a small shock. She remembered Colonel Morrison and the initial O upon a handkerchief belonging to Miss Garth. She looked at Charis's composed face, as she bowed a gracious acceptance of the other lady's apology. If she really were playing a part, she was a good actress! What, exactly, had Morrison said? That

the girl was not concealing anything discreditable—
“rather the reverse.”

Sheila was not a mischief-maker, but she thought she would tell the Colonel, when she had him to herself, of this curious recognition.

CHAPTER XVI

GILBERT COMMITS HIMSELF

IN the end it was found possible to coax the damaged car back as far as the Ullswater Hotel. There it was placed on the pit and overhauled, the verdict being that it would take a week to repair.

Fortunately there was room in the hotel for the whole party; and as Phyllis seemed to have been severely shaken, it was decided that they should remain where they were and make short excursions each day, while she recuperated.

Strachan, when he realised that she was really hurt and that he had not so much as wondered whether this was so or not, was filled with remorse, and bestowed upon her the tenderest care. This was quite to her taste; though, when he suggested a wire to her mother to come with all speed, she hastily negatived the proposal. Mamma was a bad traveller, and if Cousin George telegraphed, she would think matters were serious. A cut was really nothing at all—as soon as the doctor had sewn it up she would be all right. She was the heroine of the occasion, the centre of the picture; for the concern of Strachan was reinforced by that of Major Doran, who, though not in the least responsible for the accident, felt vaguely that he ought not to have

allowed any lady under his care to sustain injury. Soothed and flattered beyond measure, the invalid went to bed reluctantly, quitting with regret the circle of commiserating faces, but consoled by the arrival of a smart and sympathetic doctor from Keswick, summoned by telephone to her assistance.

Charis was herself feeling more upset than she could at all account for. Being rather indignantly determined not to yield to such nonsensical nervous excitement, she found Strachan's attaché-case, and went to calm herself down with an hour's work in the writing-room, which was fortunately deserted.

Ignoring the headache which would have made a couple of hours upon her bed a more sensible course, she set herself doggedly to the transcription of various letters, advising heads of departments that Mr. Strachan contemplated sending out his cousin forthwith to represent him.

By degrees her pen moved slowly and more slowly. At last she laid it down. Her mind would hold only the annoying memory of that supreme moment when she was swept up into Gilbert Brown's capacious hold.

Gilbert Brown! For pity's sake! Gilbert Brown and Charis Osbourne? . . .

She knew that she was turning scarlet; and she felt hot all over at the thought of her father being introduced to Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown. These are days of levelling, but her imagination refused to reach the point of picturing such a situation.

If only Gil's departure could be hurried! If only

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Strachan could succeed in packing him off before it was too late. . . .

. . . And then the door opened quietly, and she knew it was already too late.

Gilbert Cranstoun-Brown—and the “Cranstoun” seemed to give the final touch of absurdity—stood just within the door. The natural colour had not yet returned to his rugged face, which still seemed unusually pale. His eyes were burning in his head, and Charis knew that the scene she would so gladly have avoided had got to be!

He came up to her with much the mien of a man going to execution. “I want to speak to you. Will you come out into the garden?” he said.

“I’m very busy,” she mumbled, with an apologetic glance at her work. “Won’t this room do? There is nobody here but ourselves.”

“But we may be interrupted any moment——”

“Oh, but I hope you are not going to demand a long interview, because I must finish these letters . . . and I do fervently trust you are not going to tell me that you mean to decline your cousin’s offer? You seemed dreadfully half-hearted about it this morning.”

He sat down at right angles to her, just round the corner of the table, upon which he leaned his arms. His face, in all its rough-cut strength, was very near hers.

“You know what I must say. After this afternoon—after that—*moment*—I have simply got to say it. And how can I express it? To say ‘I love

you' falls so ludicrously short of the truth." Charis got to her feet, furious to find herself trembling.

"Please! *Please* don't go on! It's no use, I can't listen. Won't you—can't you leave it unsaid?"

He looked up at her. For a long moment they faced each other, eye to eye. "Is that it?" he demanded slowly. "Am I so low as all that? So posterously out of the question that I may not even tell about this—this fire that you have kindled?"

Something in the force of his expression and of his utterance made her feel mean and small; she felt as if he were treading the asphodel meadows, and she fussing over the counter of a shop. She answered nervously and at random:

"Ah, don't speak so! If it were a question of condescension—well! The condescending is hardly on your side, is it? Ask your mother and sisters what they think. You know how grieved, how disappointed they would be. . . . But for other reasons it's impossible, take my word for it. I can't explain . . . but there are circumstances which make me unable even to consider——"

"Sit down!" broke in Gilbert, almost sharply. Charis wavered. She dropped her lids, breathed quickly, made a movement as though to collect her papers and flee. Gilbert laid his large, square hand upon her wrist.

She sat down, listening to his steady utterance; for it seemed his nervousness was gone, swallowed up by her scorn. "There isn't much need of words. You understand me well enough. The thing which

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is surprising, and presumably to you vexatious, is that I also understand you. We have tastes in common. We are companions. I know it. I have seen you bored. But the point is, that *I don't bore you*. Far above me though you are, I believe I could make you happy."

She was quite confused. "What makes you talk like this? It sounds ironical! *Far above you*—to your cousin's secretary!"

"If I didn't realise how far above me you are, I should be an oaf—an imbecile. What do I care for your circumstances? I don't want to know whose daughter you are, when I know you, yourself! Can't you drop the conventions, and realise that I am speaking to you now simply as between you and me—between man and woman? Answer truly—are you certain that I mean nothing to you? That you don't care a bit?"

Charis swallowed once or twice before she could reply. Never before had she felt this curious, abject sensation when rejecting a suitor.

"It isn't true," she murmured lamely, "that you mean nothing to me. I like you. I—I think highly of your character. But that has really so little to do with it, hasn't it?" Then, seeing the instinctive movement with which his hand went up to hide the quivering of his mouth: "Oh, do believe," she pleaded, "that I would have prevented this, if I could! Think! Think! You are going off soon, into fresh surroundings, a new life—you are going to make a fortune, to meet all sorts of charming

girls! Soon—much sooner than you think, you will have left this moment behind you! I don't mean you will forget it, but it will cease to count—indeed it will."

He answered nothing. He propped up his obstinate chin upon his fists and stared straight in front of him.

"Mr. Brown, you don't reproach me? You don't think I have behaved as though——"

He shook his head. "No," he replied quietly, "I knew I was riding for a fall. I hadn't a hope—not really. But somehow, when one is in the state in which I am, one believes anything may happen. The skies may fall, the stars may stoop . . . I felt I had to tell you and I am glad you know it. You had to know it. It—it wouldn't have made a ha'porth of difference if I had waited, would it?" he added wistfully.

She shook her head. "Oh, no."

"I suppose there's another man?"

She started. "I don't think so."

"That means, there is. Of course, then, the whole thing's hopeless. I'll take myself out of your sight."

He rose heavily, but paused a moment behind her chair. She felt it vibrate as he gripped its back. "Remember that this shall make no difference to you, whatever it does to me. I am still your friend—I don't resent your turning me down—there was no reason why you should do anything else. For the short remains of our time together, I guarantee I'll behave myself."

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"Mr. Brown, you are fine! I'm grateful."

"And you won't avoid me?"

"Indeed I won't! It would be to punish myself, because I like you—very much . . . you make me feel such a pig."

"Oh, rubbish! Well! There it is. But the whole thing is wrong, somewhere. That I should meet you—that you should inspire me with what is practically a new soul; and that I must go through all my future life unfulfilled, because either you or I have made a mistake. . . ."

"There are so many mistakes in this twisted universe."

He turned to her a face so changed that she hardly knew it—as it were purged by love and suffering. "In some other world, is it possible you might know you belong to me? I wonder."

Upon the words he walked out of the room; and Charis found herself left sick and shivering, and more miserable than she would have thought possible, upon no greater occasion than just refusing the hand of a Cranstoun-Brown!

CHAPTER XVII

LORD CLEMENT BUTTS IN

THE doctor who had been called in to see Phyllis prescribed bed for forty-eight hours, on the ground that it is always difficult at first to gauge the extent of a shock to the nervous system.

Indeed, the whole party in the damaged car had been more or less shaken; and Gilbert more hurt than he allowed anyone to suppose. Thus his gloom and Miss Garth's depression seemed but natural to the others, and excited no special comment.

Those who had occupied Strachan's car, however, not having suffered in the same way, were ready to accept as a merciful dispensation any accident which detained them in the heart of such loveliness.

"The worst of motor trips is that you get through your country too fast," observed Mrs. Varick. Here they were at the very foot of Helvellyn, and in an excellent position for attacking Blencathra also. They determined to make the most of the opportunity; but the weather unfortunately was cloudy and uncertain; so, for the first day, they had to content themselves with Aira Force.

The following morning, however—the rain not actually falling, and the landlord giving it as his opinion that the mist *might* clear—they decided to

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assault the mountain. Morrison was a climber, and knew all the routes.

Charis had intended to remain at home with Phyllis, who must not be left alone, nor feel herself neglected. Thus she would be spared the long day in Gilbert's company; though his behaviour was so circumspect and his self-control so complete that only Mrs. Varick, who was observant, noticed anything unusual. She remarked to Strachan that it seemed curious for a big strong fellow like Gil to be shocked by a motor accident.

Strachan suggested that the men who had passed through the inferno of the war were many of them left with a super-sensitised nervous system, which became noticeable only in moments of stress; and she accepted this as a quite reasonable explanation. The idea that Gil was in love with the secretary had not presented itself to her. She knew her brother was, and had little doubt that, if he made up his mind to the sacrifice, Miss Garth would welcome so eligible an offer.

Fate took a hand in the arrangements for the mountain climb, by bestowing upon Strachan such a severe cold in the head that a day's exposure was manifestly not prudent for him. Charis begged that she might stay with him, and get through some arrears of work; but he laughingly shook his head.

"I'm in no mood for work," he said, "and there's nothing urgent. Since Gilbert is going out, various things can wait. I will have a good rest, and play

Patience with poor Phyl when she comes downstairs."

Thus it was settled, and Phyllis, who had been inclined to sulk at the idea of an expedition without her, was, needless to say, entirely satisfied with an arrangement which she believed to have been cunningly contrived by Cousin George, in order that he might have her exclusive society.

Lying at her ease, in one of the best bedrooms of the hotel, with the comfortable knowledge that Strachan was paying extra for the dainty meals served to her upstairs, she was tasting something much more like happiness that she had ever known. She had not seen Strachan's terrible perturbation when he was uncertain of Miss Garth's safety.

They assembled in the lounge, after an early breakfast, waiting to start until their lunch packets were brought to them. The post arrived first, however, and the waiter handed the letters to Mrs. Varick, who had an odd smile as she passed to Charis a letter with the Ringland postmark.

"Some friends of yours close by," said she. "Ringland is somewhere near Hawes Water, isn't it?"

"Yes," was the tranquil answer. "I know some people there."

She took the letter with outward composure, but—as she saw the handwriting—with inward rage. So Clement was at Ringland—and Clement knew not merely her alias, but her present address! That

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detestable, gossiping Mrs. Hunter, whom she barely knew by sight, must have told him!

She ran upstairs, ostensibly to bid Strachan good-bye, but in reality to see what her persecutor had to say. The letter was very short; merely to the effect that he intended to call at the hotel early next morning, and to "have it out with her." "As your future husband, I claim the right to regulate your proceedings," wrote this benighted and ill-advised young man. "The Osbournes do not break troth, and you and I are betrothed."

Miss Garth's changeful eyes grew steely and hard as she read. She drew a long breath. "Oh," she murmured, her thoughts adapting themselves to Strachan's attractive slang, "that really has put the lid on! He deserves—he richly deserves—anything I may choose to do after that! And so does father, for allowing him to be such a cad!"

She sat on her bed, her mind seething with all manner of impulses. She would show him up! She would take revenge! In her trunk was the bundle of notes for her projected novel; a bundle to which, night after night, she added fresh material, hastily scribbled. If, as everyone assured her, realism is now the desired note for fiction, she could give the picture of the completely selfish, completely inane, completely unreflecting young aristocrat.

So, in spite of all warnings, he was actually coming the following morning, to make trouble! . . .

Her outraged feeling was quick to suggest a glorious way of routing him! What a turning of the

tables, if she could calmly tell him that she was engaged to Gilbert Brown!

For a few wild moments the tempting prospect danced before her. She saw herself introduced to the Cranstoun-Brown parents as their future daughter-in-law. . . . She pictured their reception of the news. This motor tour, from which the match-making mamma had expected so much—was it to yield nothing but the calamitous capture of their only son in the toils of a typewriting clerk?

She chuckled and gurgled to herself as she visualised it all! And Gilbert was going away—right away! The engagement need only last until he was in Ontario. . . . Surely such priceless material would be cheap at the cost of a few days' discomfortable pretence? She knew that Gil would be the shyest, most deferential of lovers, easily kept at arm's length. . . . he would go off happy, the voyage out would be full of rosy anticipation of the moment when he could come back to claim her—and as soon as he was definitely out of the way, she could confess that she had mistaken her feeling—or, easier still, she could write and tell him that the attitude of his family made the engagement impossible.

She caught herself up with a start, aghast at her own depravity. To what was she drifting? Her heart smote her. Was not some of Clement's disapproval justified?

Ever since she first met Strachan, she had been sailing under false colours. She was the "chiel amang 'em, takin' notes"—enjoying the snobbishness

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of the Browns—occupying a position which, had she been honest, would not have been open to her.

She sighed impatiently, feeling like a cockle boat tossing upon a tide too strong for it—a tide which was carrying it remorselessly out to sea.

Seizing her fountain pen, she scrawled a telegram:

“Forbid you to come here, await letter from me which follows.—C. O.”

This she thrust into her coat pocket, and, with a glance at her watch, sprang to her feet and hurried to Strachan’s room.

She found him already dressed, and seated near a comfortable fire. Upon her entrance he looked up, and gave her the smile which he kept for her only.

As she encountered it, she knew that the time had come when she must tell this man the truth.

She felt humbled to the dust as she came up to him, and felt the warm grasp of his hand caressing her own.

“You know,” she faltered, “I don’t a bit want to go up that mountain without you.”

“Oh, shucks!” But he looked pleased. “Away you run! Youth and energy mustn’t stew all day in a hot room.”

“Perhaps. But I don’t like leaving you.”

“And I don’t like being parted from you—even for a day.”

"Phyllis will be down soon to keep you company."

"Poor lassie! I'll do my best to entertain her, but I own I find her a bit heavy on hand. Now you——"

"Oh, don't spoil me! I'm a horrid, mean girl! I have thoughts sometimes that are perfectly devilish! I despise myself, and when I come to you to confess my misdoing, you'll despise me too!" She wavered a moment, and then added impulsively:

"Will you hear my confession to-night?"

"Why, I guess I know it already. You have had to turn down Gil. But that's his fault, not yours."

This was so far from her preoccupation of the moment that her thought was flung into confusion.

"You're uncanny! How did you know?"

"Vurly easily. He came to me and said he didn't care if he started for Ontario to-morrow. So then, of course, I knew."

"Oh, please—you don't think I'm to blame?"

"I'm certain you are not. But I'm sorry for the poor chap. He didn't make himself, and he doesn't realise the gulf . . . also I think it likely that the fact of having known you will leave him spoilt for any other woman."

"You felt certain I would say No?" in a very low voice.

"Certain."

She wondered why this should annoy her. "Well, you haven't heard him make love," she said. "I assure you he's rather—wonderful. I—I—well, I

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will confide to you that I never minded saying 'No' so much."

"You can't have been more surprised than I am at this minute. Gil make love! You don't say! I would have supposed a stuck pig might give him points! But you have always thought highly of him."

"When I had to wound him so, I was glad to think that I had from the first done him justice."

Calls from the corridor without, and running footsteps broke in upon her halting words. There was pounding on the door, Vee eagerly calling to know if she were there, as the entire party waited for her.

"My fault!" cried Strachan, "tell them all I was keeping her! There, off you go! Have a good time, and come back safe."

Charis caught up the neat roll of her raincoat, strapping it to her shoulder as she ran downstairs with Vee.

"You're well equipped for mountaineering, Miss Garth," remarked Sheila approvingly as they appeared; and Charis answered breathlessly: "I was brought up in the hill country."

* * * * *

It was not until they had passed Glenridding, and were on the mountain path, that she remembered that she had not dispatched her telegram.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MISTY MOUNTAIN-TOP

THE ascent of Helvellyn, by one of the recognised tracks, is laborious, but not adventurous. The walkers, not having with them the two least active members of the party, made good going from the first.

The weather, upon their setting out, looked rather more promising, and one or two tiny rifts in the cloud canopy, showing the blue through, encouraged them to hope that after all they might be able to see some part of the magnificent panorama from the summit.

Gilbert quietly and very naturally attached himself to Sheila Varick. Morrison was discovering in Veronica the makings of a good walker and climber, and they got on together admirably, taking the lead during the whole ascent. Charis found herself paired off with Major Doran, and was astonished to find how little this was to her taste.

Doran's manner was so *empressé* that she began to fear she might make the descent that evening with another refusal to her credit. As this must be averted at all costs, her companion did not find her at all responsive.

He was a little puzzled at her unapproachable at-

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titude; and this was pardonable, since Charis was a prey to a mood which she did not herself understand. She was like one goaded, or reckless. Something in her seemed to have been jarred, and she told herself that this was the thing they called shock—the result of the motor accident.

Clement had made great capital out of it in his letter.

Suppose she had been killed, he demanded, and none of those with her had had the least idea as to where to send to let her family know what had happened? She might have been buried under another name and her father might not have known of his loss for weeks.

There was little doubt that, as a fact, she *had* suffered in some obscure way. She had slept badly ever since; and it was extremely annoying to be constantly awaking with a start from confused dreams in which Gilbert was snatching her to his heart, guarding her from imminent peril—some gigantic wave about to break, some horrible animal loosed from its cage.

It all seemed so ridiculous in the light of day—when one could look at his wooden face as he made his way up the rocky track, moving a trifle stiffly, for the lady who had crashed into him had bruised the muscles of his back, and Charis knew he had been more hurt than he would allow.

She wished he would have walked with her. His company was always congenial, and there being, in his case, now no question of warding off an impend-

ing declaration, she knew she would have enjoyed the climb with him.

It seemed curious; for Doran was more of her own set, after all. She began to wonder why she liked him so little. She was obliged to fence all the way up, to steer the talk away from the intimate and the personal; and presently she had a considerable shock.

They were speaking of Strachan—of his curious charm and strong individuality; and Charis, glad to have struck so safe a subject, was enlarging upon the pleasure it was to work for him. "You know," she said, "he demands one's best. His kindness doesn't lead him to tolerate any slipshod, careless ways. His clerk has to be thorough. It is fine work, because I have to put forth all my powers to do justice to what he expects of me."

"And how long," softly inquired Doran, "how long is the masquerade to last—eh?"

This was so unexpected a buffet that she was completely taken aback. "The—the masquerade? What masquerade?" she echoed.

"Have I dropped a brick? If so, I humbly beg pardon. But I concluded, by your allowing us to bring you into these parts, that it was wearing a bit thin: in short I was under the impression that it is by now a kind of *secret de Polichinelle*. My sister told me you were recognised by one of the ladies on the car that ran us down."

"One of the ladies thought—imagined—that she recognised me."

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"I see I have been intrusive and detestable. Please forget what I have said. I assure you I have no wish to pry into your private affairs—and perhaps I had better give Morrison the tip to hold his tongue carefully. You may not be aware that he is a friend of Clem Vyner. . . . But I think you ought to be told that the only ones in this party who have no suspicions are the Browns and Strachan."

Charis had had time to recapture her control. "Really, Major Doran, you puzzle me," said she. "I think Colonel Morrison must have found a mare's nest. I don't exactly know what you are insinuating, but what you say is very disagreeable to me."

"My sincerest apologies, and only one word more; if you think carefully, you may be able to hit upon a reason why I should wish to convey to you the knowledge that I, personally, am not deceived. The device of the disguised heiress is still popular in fiction. There should, I feel, be perfect honesty on the part of one who thinks as highly of you as I do."

Charis drew a long breath, touched and surprised by this evidence of delicacy of mind. The Major, wishing to marry her, would not allow her to suppose that he really believed her to be the Miss Garth who took a salary for clerical work.

She felt bitterly ashamed. His straightforwardness made her own path look crookeder than ever. She felt inclined to blurt out: "You are a good fellow and a gentleman!" But she dared not risk the result of such candour.

"Oh, if you have this curious notion in your head,

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you were perhaps right to tell me of it," said she, in tones as careless as she could manage. "I must pick my crow with Colonel Morrison, who has been supplying you with these wild surmises. Oh, look! What a terrific bit of rock! Is that Striding Edge?"

"It is indeed, and here is where we do a bit of climbing. Morrison said he would take us over. Look at Miss Vee! How she goes! But you are pretty well as good. In which of your clerk's jobs did you study mountaineering? Oh, I beg pardon! That's forbidden, isn't it?"

"You seem to forget that even clerks have holidays. When we reach the top of this, we are not far from the summit, are we?"

"I believe not. Fine, isn't it?"

"Isn't this near the spot where the dead traveller was guarded by his dog for weeks?"

"You'll see their monument when we reach the summit."

Talk died down into mere ejaculations and comments upon the ascent. But the beating of Charis's heart was still hardly normal when they all assembled upon the bare, stony plateau of the summit, and drew within the shelter of the four-armed stone wall erection which offers bleak asylum from the wind.

"Excellent time!" cried Morrison, exultingly consulting his watch. "What ho, comrades! We stand upon the summit of achievement!"

"If only we could see just a very few inches beyond our noses!" sighed Mrs. Varick.

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"If I had such a nice nose as yours, Mrs. Varick, I don't think I should have much desire to see beyond!"

"Surely that would limit her point of view *too* sternly," put in Gilbert.

"Thanks, Gil," cried Sheila, "it's lovely to be told one's nose is small—nothing flatters a woman more. Yet a large nose is a sign of character, they say! I ought to be a nincompoo!"

"Well, dear girl, nobody has said you are not," observed the Major fraternally.

"We don't say quite such obvious things as that, though we are not all of us wits," returned Gil. "We had better sit down in the shelter of this place and eat our lunch, hadn't we?"

"What is the good of a wind, if it won't clear the sky for us?" complained Charis. "Let's see what way it blows"—holding her handkerchief in the breeze—"ah, I see you have chosen the right corner for us, Mr. Brown."

"Sit here," said Gil quietly, motioning to where he had laid a folded mackintosh upon the stone-seat. She smiled gratefully. "Thank you," said she, sitting down; and, after a moment's hesitation, he deliberately took his place at her side.

He was indeed taking his rebuff finely. She had not foreseen, nor reckoned upon the effect his demeanour produced upon her. It was something to admire and to wonder at. Charis recalled the behaviour of her cousin Clement after their rupture—his resentment, his childish mortification at being

thwarted—the things he had made, and was still making, her endure in his pig-headed obstinacy; and she came to the conclusion that either Gilbert was much more completely a gentleman at heart than his rival, or that he was not feeling things nearly as much as she expected.

No one could have guessed, his bearing being so completely natural, that he was staggering under a blow which he felt to be mortal. But just once his courage did fail him, and the glimpse she then obtained of what he was going through startled her.

The weather was bitterly cold, and as they set out she had complained that the nipping air made her fingers quite numb. When she reached the summit, however, she was glowing from head to foot. As Gilbert brought a package of meat pasties and stooped to hand them to her, he said: "I hope your hands are warm now?"

"Why," cried she, "I'm warm to the very tips of my fingers! Feel! Just feel!"

She laid her bare hand over his—the wonderful hand, so fine in texture, so unlike that of any woman he knew; the first thing upon which his eye had rested, in perfect satisfaction, upon the fatal evening when this new planet swam into his ken. At the touch he actually flinched, flinging her a look which mutely asked: "Is there to be no limit to my purgatory?"

Then, withdrawing from the unbearable contact, he said, "That's very satisfactory," and, strolling away a few paces, stood with back turned. She knew

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he was fighting for control, repairing armour temporarily pierced; and a kind of anger vexed her. He had no right to be so splendid!

In a minute or two he sauntered back, and, without resuming his place, stood munching his sandwich. "I'm afraid the mists are coming lower," said he; "we are not going to have any view."

"What a pity! However, we can all proudly say that we've climbed the dark brow of the mighty Helvellyn," said Vee. "Did they make you learn that at school? How does it go:

*"On the right, Striding Edge round the Red Tarn was bending,
And Catchedicam its left verge was defending——"*

Isn't that a fine description? I'm glad we came up that way, and just caught a glimpse of the little Tarn!"

"Which way do we go on from here?" asked Gilbert.

Morrison indicated the direction with his hand. "Round there—across the end of Swirrel Edge, and over Low Man. I did propose to go down by the Dodds, but it's useless to do that with the weather so thick, merely a long dull tramp over grassy slopes; so I propose to strike off just above Keppelcove Tarn, and come down past the mines to Glenridding. No need for hurry, we have plenty of time, these ladies are all so game."

"Easier than I expected," said Vee, with keen satisfaction. "How I wish I could tackle a real climb!"

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"I'm sure you could, too," replied Morrison, with enthusiasm. "If we are still here to-morrow, I would like to take you over Sharp Edge—on Saddleback."

"Saddleback, did you say? That's Blencathra, isn't it?"

"Yes. We could motor to Mungresdale in Strachan's car and go up from there. But perhaps you'd be too tired."

"And Gilbert won't be here," said Sheila sadly. "He tells me he is going off to-morrow to collect his kit for Canada."

"Shame!" cried Morrison. "Surely, Brown, there's no need for you to break up the happy home like this?"

"Think how we shall miss you," mourned Sheila. "My camera never will behave itself for anybody but you."

"To be missed by your camera, Mrs. Varick, is better than not being missed at all. But you see I must go out into the world and make my fortune."

"Lucky beggar! With a tame millionaire at your elbow to propel you gently along the golden road," sighed Morrison.

"Just so. I'm not insensible to my blessings, I assure you. I mean to do my best to 'make good,' as dear old George would say."

"Fill glasses!" cried Sheila suddenly. "Let us drink the health of the new Columbus!"

They all rose to their feet, and Doran went round,

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filling up the tin cups with the wine which Strachan had insisted upon providing.

"Here's to our adventurer! May he make good!" cried Sheila, touching her mug to Gilbert's.

"Best of luck, old man! Come back bursting with oof!" added Vee.

"Show them a bit of the British Terrier," from Morrison.

"May your fine courage carry you through," said Charis softly. There was almost a plea in her eyes as she extended the ridiculous tin cup. Gilbert touched it with his own, but did not look at the drinker.

"Courage! You're right, Miss Garth," said Doran. "It was he who ought to have pouched the D.S.O. they gave me. These things always go to the wrong chap, somehow. Here's luck, Gil! May Canada appreciate you at your true value. Don't be too modest, old son!"

Gil smiled queerly. "I don't think modesty is one of my failings. What do you say, Miss Garth?"

It was the solitary thrust he permitted himself, and she took it meekly.

CHAPTER XIX

LOST! LOST! LOST!

AFTER this little ceremony, lunch was packed away, cigarettes discussed, and the descent began.

Charis found Gilbert at her side. That this proximity should give her disturbing thrills was doubtless absurd; but nervous shock is an odd thing. You do not know you are suffering from it until the symptoms break out in this annoying fashion.

Fiercely she determined to jump upon insurgent emotion, and be as natural and dignified as was her rejected suitor. Surely if he, who was confessedly suffering, could be cool, why not she, who was not suffering at all, save for her compunction in having inflicted pain?

Desperately she began to talk—to say anything that came first, out of sheer nervousness. They had been reading Wordsworth's "Ode for the Festival at Brougham Castle," when the rightful heir came into his own. She was puzzled by the allusion to "the undying fish that swim in Bowscale Tarn." It seemed quite natural that Gilbert should be able to enlighten her. They conversed together upon the local references in the poem with complete mutual satisfaction. What Gilbert had claimed was perfectly true. She was never bored in his company.

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Nevertheless, no pause in the conversation could be tolerated; and when Lord Clifford's wanderings had been discussed, she dashed on headlong, filling up the silence.

"As you are leaving at once, I conclude that your father is pleased with Mr. Strachan's offer?"

"What did you say?" He seemed to start from abstraction. "Oh, yes, naturally. As you prophesied, my mother seems to be making rather a trouble of it; but her view of life is a bit narrow. She has an idea that you only ship a man off to Canada if he is a hopeless rotter. Well, I'm not exactly that perhaps; but all the same, I'm a failure—in love, in war, in business. So to Canada it is fitting that I go."

"If you are going in that spirit," she cried with vexation, "you will never succeed!"

"You think not?"

"And it's so important that you *should* succeed."

"Important? To whom? Oh, I see. You are thinking of my Cousin George."

"Of course I am. I told him he might trust you. I said I knew you would not let him down. Don't make me a false prophet—don't!"

"Please," he said with careful quietude, "don't try to make me think you care, when you don't care a rap."

"If I don't care for you, I do for him," she cried, stung.

"Oh?" queried Gil; and then, after a pause which

apparently brought enlightenment "O-oh! Is that it?"

The echo of her rash words came back to her in the significance of his tone, and she trembled with annoyance. "Oh, don't pretend to be stupid! You know what I mean. I am in his service, I am anxious to help him all I can—" She floundered for words, and suddenly felt that the less she said the better.

Gilbert, who had been walking with his eyes on the ground, gave a great sigh, straightened his shoulders and looked up.

He made a small sound of consternation, staring in front of him; and Charis likewise came to herself with a start and gazed around. They came to a standstill.

Swirls of soft white vapour, like smoke, were all about them. There was neither sight nor sound of the others. They stood side by side in a white world of their own, as though a curtain had been lowered between themselves and all the rest of creation.

"I must shout," said Gilbert, searching his pockets, his face crimson with mortification. "I don't know the way . . . and . . . Great Scott! I lent my map to Doran at lunch, and he hasn't returned it!"

"Oh, shout!" urged Charis, "please shout at once, and as loud as you can!"

Gilbert raised his voice—he had sound lungs—

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and was answered by a faint "Hallo!" through the mist.

"Where are you? Stop! Stand still till we join you!" he cried.

A muttering of confused sound came back to them. They could not distinguish the words.

"Can't hear! speak louder!" he trumpeted. The reply wandered back to them as a wholly unintelligible murmur.

"Idiots! They are moving farther off!" raged poor Gil. "Why can't they come back a few steps?"

"Are you sure we were behind them?" asked Charis hesitatingly.

He bit his lip. Since they started to walk together he had been conscious of nothing but her, and they both knew it.

"If they, too, are enveloped in this mist," she suggested, "they probably think they had better not move until they can see their direction. It is growing thicker every minute."

"Like having one's head wrapped up in a blanket," he groaned. "However, I'll try once more." Again he sent out his powerful voice; this time they could hardly be certain of being answered at all. Silence fell, a curious silence, which seemed full of a vast suspense, as if the great mountain waited to see what the two waifs upon her desolate and stony summit would make of the situation.

"I am trying to remember," said Gilbert feverishly, "exactly what Morrison said. As far as I can recall it, he thought it was useless to go down by the

Dodds, in this weather, because one can see nothing in the way of a prospect. He meant to begin by following the route down by the Dodds, and strike off it, so as to go down Glenridding."

"Yes, that's my memory of what he said . . . and didn't he mention that there are cairns along the track?" He moved away a few steps, uncertainly, and she cried quickly: "Don't go away! Don't leave me alone!"

"I was trying to shape a course by the direction of the wind," he explained, "but it appears to have dropped. On the summit there was quite a sharp, cold breeze from the south-west; but now it seems to be blowing any way, or hardly at all. These vapours are all twisting and curling about like steam in a cauldron." . . . He paused, then turned to her a face she hardly recognised.

"This is all my miserable fault. I was so wrapped up in my own feelings that I could think of nothing else. I swore to you that it should make no difference; and now I've landed you in this . . . and the mischief of it all is, that though I deserve to be sent packing, you'll have to put up with my society for the present, on the ground that even I am better than nobody."

He seemed as though he would have said more, but his voice died as he met her hazel eyes lifted to his from under the soft woolly edge of her cap, which, with the loose hair above her brow, was thickly beaded with the condensed moisture of the mist.

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"Mr. Brown, don't be silly! If I had to be lost, I'm glad—yes, glad—that it's you I am lost with! Cheer up! These clouds are on the move. There will come a jag in the curtain presently, and then we shall see where we are."

His mouth quivered as he gazed upon her. Then, brushing his eyes with his hand, he drew a long breath. "I might have known," he murmured. What it was that he might have known did not appear. When he spoke again, his face had lost its chalky whiteness, and he had himself well in hand. "I agree with you that it's quite likely we may get a peep before long, and I think it worth while to wait a bit. I feel helpless, because I haven't a compass. One never ought to go up without one."

"Well, I think we are unduly nervous. I expect we are only a few steps out of our way, after all."

"If this were August, there would probably, even on such a bad day, be other parties up here. But at this time of year the ascents are not so frequent. I think I'll try one more call, shall I?"

He did so; but this time there was no response.

"If they thought we were lost, they would have waited, or turned back," said she. "We have not moved, so I conclude we have only to go on as soon as our way becomes visible. I dare say the mist isn't so thick where they are, and they don't realise we are in difficulties."

"Quite likely."

"And we're not in difficulties, are we?" Her

smile was almost coaxing. "We're just taking a few minutes' rest."

He sat down on the stony ground near her, but not very near. For a long minute the surrounding silence closed over their heads like an ocean. Then he said, quietly:

"So, one day more am I deified.
Who knows but the world may end to-night?"

She sighed, restlessly. In every pulse she felt his influence. He was not looking at her, he was demanding nothing; but he seemed to her to be dangerously strong.

"Mr. Brown," said she suddenly, "you mustn't. Kindly allow me the free use of my own will and judgment."

"I'm not; at least, I'm trying not to," was the cryptic response. A spectator might have recalled Wordsworth's comment on the Brownings: "Well, it is to be hoped they understand each other, for certainly no one else could."

Charis understood, fatally well.

"A-a-ah!" cried he, breaking the intense moment.

The veil of white showed dark spots in its heart. It raced on, tossing wild, Kühleborn-like arms. The arid waste at their feet unrolled slowly before them; they saw a little heap of stones—then another.

"The cairns!" cried Gilbert, springing to his feet. "We are on the path all right—dead on it!"

He helped her up and they moved on eagerly. They could perceive a faint track, and this they fol-

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lowed for some time, the mist just allowing them a glimpse of the next little cairn ahead. When they had gone some way there was a further lifting of the veil, which showed them on their right a sheer drop. They were about to skirt the upper edge of a line of precipitous crags.

"That must be Swirrel Edge—no doubt the Red Tarn lies down there, where the fog's so dense. Morrison said we had to cross the end of it, so all we have to do now is to go on and—why, look down there—no, ever so far—farther on your left. . . ."

A wan beam of light in the valley glinted upon water. "The lake! Why, of course, that must be Ullswater. We're looking straight down Glenridding. Ah, well, we are all right now!"

"My guilty conscience made me lose heart too soon," he apologised, as they made the best of their way onward. As they progressed the way became each instant more difficult. Gilbert had not expected to find it so hard, so much of an actual climb as it was proving to be.

He was no mountaineer, but he was strong, steady and capable. He felt that his companion knew more about rocks than he did. She made no complaint, and came along bravely; but the mist still dogged them, hanging about, sweeping to and fro, and making it impossible to see any line of country far ahead.

Once it came down so densely that they dare not go forward and were obliged to sit down and rest. Gilbert had some biscuits in his rucksack, and also

some hot drink in a flask. While they refreshed themselves, they talked—talked as it seemed most unlikely that either of them would ever talk to anyone else on earth. Problems of destiny, of philosophy, of religion—upon each of these there seemed to be between them that amount of common ground which, while it does not necessarily mean agreement, means always an intelligible basis for discussion. Gilbert knew that this girl had received a first-rate education. In fact, a passing allusion showed him that she had been at Oxford.

In spite, however, of the supreme fascination of their talk, he was again on his feet the moment the mist lifted. This time the wind had apparently made up its mind to blow steadily, and soon the whole of the mountainside below them came into plain sight, though all distances still remained shrouded.

"I think the wind has changed," he said doubtfully. "We ought to be on the sheltered side more or less here, and it seems to be driving right at us."

"All the better! It will chase this mist clean away! Now, you must just drink this that I have poured out for you, and then we'll go on."

She held out to him the cup portion of the flask. "Sorry you must drink after me," said she, "but there is no other cup."

Gilbert knelt down in the coarse herbage at her feet. He took off his cap, received the cup, and drank, as it were, sacramentally. It was done so quietly that the significance of the action would have

been lost on most spectators. To bring himself to her level, as she sat on a low stone, it might be as easy to drink upon his knees as in any other position. But the import of what he did flowed in upon Charis, and shook her unexpectedly. While ignoring—as was doubtless his wish—the whole transaction, she found that her voice, when she wanted to say something flippant, was not under control. She choked and was silent.

Now that he could see below him, Gilbert was acutely aware that they had by no means begun their descent by the best way; in fact, they had lost the path, and had some very difficult ground to negotiate. The sight of the lake now again visible was, however, reassuring, and he worked with all his might to lessen her fatigue as much as possible over the long tract of marshy ground which they found themselves obliged to traverse.

He was a good deal puzzled that the features of the hills, now that he could see something of them, did not seem to tally with what he remembered of the Ullswater Valley. As they descended, he searched in vain for some landmark which might show him how far along the lakeside they would strike the high road.

He began to fear that they must have moved a long way northward of their true course, and be coming down not Glenridding, but Glencoyne, a mile or two higher up or rather lower down the lake than the portion near Patterdale, which was all that he knew.

When, after a protracted and toilsome struggle, they actually came out upon the firm white road, he could hardly believe in his good fortune, for it was not much after seven o'clock—they might count upon two hours more of daylight—and he thought he could certainly hire some kind of vehicle to drive them back should it turn out that they had far to go.

"We turn to the right, of course," said he doubtfully. "But I am afraid we must be a good way from Glenridding. It all looks so different, doesn't it? The lake is so much narrower here than it is where we are staying."

Charis agreed. The road upon which they stood seemed to be entirely unfrequented. It was beautiful, with the grey, wan, tearful beauty of the lake district; but it seemed lonely and forlorn.

"Well," said she, "we had better walk on. We are sure to find a hotel soon, are we not?"

"Oh, quite sure; and then I can get a trap and drive you back. I can see you are very tired. That has been heavy going—all through my inexperience!"

"What nonsense! The best mountaineers get lost in a mist, and without map or compass, what can one do?"

They walked on cheerfully; but Gilbert grew still more worried when the road they followed ceased to border the lake and turned more or less inland. They kept on, however, and when they had gone the better part of two miles they came upon a small inn.

"Good!" he cried. "Now we can find out where

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we are! Courage! After all, we shan't be much late for dinner at the hotel."

It was quite a small, wayside affair, most unlike the big hotels at Patterdale and Glenridding, and it was with a curious sense of walking in a dream, or a nightmare, that Gilbert went into the bar and asked how far they were from the Ullswater Hotel.

The landlord, who stood behind his bar, set down the glass he was wiping and stared open-mouthed, as though they had asked how far it was to London.

"*Ullswater?*" he repeated, scratching his head.

"Yes, the hotel along here"—pointing as he spoke—"the hotel by the lakeside at Glenridding?"

"Glenridding? Why, where d'you think you are?"

"Well, I don't know exactly where I am, but on the shore of Ullswater somewhere——"

"This ain't Ullswater. This is Thirlmere," ejaculated the landlord, staring as though he thought Gilbert slightly daft.

CHAPTER XX

BID ME GOOD-BYE

THIRLMERE!" they both echoed, unable to believe their ears.

The landlord lifted the flap of his counter and came out to them, as though he thought this might help to elucidate the situation. "Where you come from?" he asked with interest.

"From the top of Helvellyn. We made the ascent from Glenridding this morning."

"And then the mist came down, eh? Well, you ain't the first that's made the same mistake. Took the Low Man Crags to be Swirrel Edge, "I'll lay. Came down the wrong side of the mountain. Well, there it is."

Gilbert was so mortified that he could not, for a moment, say anything at all.

"We got separated from our party, and they had all the maps and the compass with them," put in Charis. "However, we are safe and sound, so there is no need to worry. I suppose we can get home to-night?"

Gilbert, glancing round, went to where a big ordnance map hung upon the wall. He examined it closely, in a bitter silence. "Yes," he muttered at last, "I see how it happened."

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"And as I was telling you, you ain't the first," was the man's cheerful comment.

Gilbert's gaze ran up the map, following the line of the only road, which ran northward through the Valley of St. John and then bent round, eastward by way of Threlkeld and Troutbeck, dropping to the lake past Dockray, by Lyulph's Tower. It was the only way back, unless you went, as they had come, over the mountain itself.

"Got any horses?" he asked the man.

"I've got two, but they're out. The Water Company's busy making a survey, out by Hawes Water somewhere, and they've hired 'em. They won't get back to-night."

"No car, I suppose?"

"No, sir."

"Where do you suppose I could find either horses or a car?"

"Bad day for that, sir. There's nowt at Wythburn, I know, for the survey men have hired theirs too. Not nearer than Threlkeld or Keswick, I'm afraid."

Gilbert measured with his eye the distance on the map.

"Five—six miles to Threlkeld."

"I can do that," said Charis determinedly.

"Well, if we make the attempt we must have a meal first," he replied, turning from the map with a sigh. "Can you give us anything?" he asked the landlord; "eggs and bacon would do."

Their host thought eggs and bacon might be

managed, and ushered them into a little parlour which felt chilly and smelt stuffy. Gilbert asked him to light the fire, upon which he summoned his wife, a sour, stony-looking female, who performed the operation with seeming reluctance, and then conducted Charis to a low-ceilinged room almost completely filled by a large four-post bed, and gave her water and a towel.

The water was cold, and the girl guessed that there was no fire, even in the kitchen, upon that night of supposed summer.

"I fancy they will have to light the fire before they can cook us anything," said she, as she reappeared in the parlour, freshly brushed and neat. "Hadn't we better say that bread and cheese will do?"

"No," said Gilbert decidedly. "A good rest is necessary for you, if you are to trudge these mortal miles this evening. It won't be dark for a long time yet, and I know George Strachan would want me to take care of you."

"But I don't want to keep him in a state of anxiety—for he will be anxious, you know."

"He will," muttered Gilbert, as though the fact displeased him.

"And this waiting is all on my account. If you were alone, you would go on without waiting at all, wouldn't you now?"

"If I were alone? That will be always," he said heavily; adding after a pulsating pause, "Oh, I see, you think I'm behaving like a cad—spinning it out—

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but honestly, I didn't lose the way on purpose. I did actually believe that we were coming down on Ullswater. I had no intention of forcing my company on you all these hours. You believe that, don't you?"

"Yes," was all her reply. She was sitting upon a black horsehair couch, which was festooned with many crochet antimacassars. Her elbow rested upon its head, her chin was propped in her hand. Her eyes gazed out upon the little patch of garden ground visible through the window. As so often happens in the north, the house had been placed and planned without the smallest regard for aspect or outlook. The small mean back premises of the inn might have been those of a suburban hostelry.

Gilbert, who had been pacing the room, came and sat down by her. She did not move, nor make any sign of disliking his company. They remained so for some time, in a queer stillness as though they both dreaded the next word or movement. A clock with a hoarse wheezy tick measured off the duration of that endless pause. The man's voice broke it; but gently, as though he handled it with awe. "I'm going away to-morrow . . . I wonder what you would say if I asked you to let me kiss you good-bye?"

She sat upright with a start. Just for a moment she drew herself away, her hands over her mouth. Gilbert, accepting this decision without protest, made to rise. Then her hand flashed out and detained him. She gave a gasp which was half a cry;

and in a moment, how could hardly be said, she was sobbing in his arms, her forehead propped against his shoulder.

"Oh, Gilbert, don't! *Don't!*" she brought out amid her tears. "What have you done to me? I can't. . . . Oh, oh, it's unbearable!"

He held her closely, and his touch was magnetic, or vital. She felt, as she afterwards phrased it, as if her very bones were melting. His voice, low and steady, sounded close to her ear.

"It's all right. Don't reproach yourself. You've been honest with me, and I don't complain. Tomorrow I shall be gone, and I don't think you'll be any the worse for having given me five minutes' heaven . . . will you?"

In sheer surprise her sobs died away. He was extraordinary. What any other man must have taken for surrender, he believed to be merely the outrush of sympathy for his suffering.

"Oh, you're uncanny," she faltered, "uncanny! How came you to be so—so——"

"So—what?"

"Like this!"

"Why, you know very well. What happened to Cymon has happened to me. Did you expect that it would make no difference?"

He still held her—not exactly tightly, but very firmly. She made no effort to detach herself, though it was to her as though his very being were communicating itself to her in every throb of the

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healthy heart which she could hear pounding in his chest.

"I don't know . . . I can't foresee . . . how all this can end," she murmured, as though she did not know what she said, "but yes—since it means so much to you—you may, Gilbert, you may!"

The organ to which her ear was pressed gave a leap, but he neither moved nor tightened his hold. He bent his head a little and she turned her face upward with closed eyes, waiting.

A tense moment went by in which nothing happened.

"I was wrong," he whispered thickly. "I—mustn't! Once done, it could never be undone, for ever and ever."

He could hardly hear the answering whisper which was sighed forth into the air.

"I'll . . . risk it!"

Then, indeed, she knew the pressure of his warm, strong mouth upon her own—knew it with a terror, a sudden realisation that the die was cast—that the man had been right—it could never be undone. . . .

It lasted a thousand years. When she was free to speak again, she moaned submissively:

"Very well, if I must. Yes. I'll marry you."

"If you marry any other man, you'll still be mine," said Gilbert calmly; but his low voice sounded like a pæan of triumph.

In the ensuing moments Charis was conscious of feeling like two people at once. Half of her was there, trembling in her lover's arms—and half of

her hovered perilously upon the brink of a wild reaction—of a resentment which threatened to grow formidable.

Just as she was on the point of tearing herself away, the arms which enclosed her opened. With steady hands Gilbert put her from him, rose, went to the window; stood there silent, moved towards the door—then back; and spoke what were perhaps the words she would least have expected to hear.

"I'm a cad. I've done the very thing that any man with a gleam of chivalry—of generosity—would not have done. I've played upon your feelings, I've attacked your loneliness, your fatigue, your pity! . . . Well, it's over. You won't expect me to say I regret what has happened—because I am going to live on the memory of it for the rest of my life. But what you said just then was nonsense, of course. We are not engaged."

This announcement flung his lady into a whirlpool of confused thought. It knocked flat the seething rebellion in her, leaving her so astonished that all mental process ceased, and nothing was left but a tingling memory which caused her, who rarely blushed, to feel herself crimson all over.

"You . . . mean that?" she succeeded in saying at last.

"I mean it. When you were in your sober senses, you had no use for me. You refused me without any kind of hesitation. Now because you are feeling done up and weak, and because I've worked you up into a state of emotional compassion, you have said

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what it would cost you dear to stand to. Well, I give you back your word."

"I'm not in the habit . . . of taking back my word."

"Ah, you're brave—brave and reckless. I must take the decision out of your hands. It's a hundred to one that to-morrow you'll wonder what possessed you to tie yourself up to a fellow you don't love."

She contemplated him with an expression hard to analyse. Was he right? How *did* she feel? Was she relieved? Or was she suddenly cold, like a nestling pushed out from love's warm nest? She could not deny that, even with his arms about her, she had doubted, and rebelled. Would her present mood pass utterly, leaving only the ashes of a momentary passion, a straw fire? . . . His insight was literally terrible.

"You are . . . an extraordinary man," she murmured.

"You won't think so to-morrow. You will see me by the light of common day—just one of a hundred thousand mediocre chaps with as much right to your love as a cabbage has to be the central dish of the dessert table. I'm under no illusions myself, and you shall not be either if I can help it. If, when this is all over and I have gone to Ontario, you should feel that you can't live without me . . . why then"—with a wry smile—"you can write and tell me so. But this evening, there is no question of our being engaged."

"And it is of no use for me to protest?"

"Not the faintest. I decide this."

"I wonder if you're right, or whether you're helplessly, ruinously wrong? . . . I can't tell. Perhaps it is better to leave it until to-morrow. I feel so wretchedly uncertain. It is not so much that I doubt my own feelings; but there are so many things to be considered—to be faced—things you don't know about—which I couldn't tell you about, unless we were engaged . . . and . . . I'm very tired."

"I know it. Here comes your supper. Don't worry about me. I'm pretty tough. I can stand things."

The landlord's wife brought in a sizzling dish of ham and eggs.

CHAPTER XXI

PHYLLIS EXPLAINS

THE rain was streaming steadily; a merciless downpour which looked as if it meant to last for a week. It was cold too—cold as summer in the north so well knows how to be.

The solitary occupant of the Rolls-Royce which drew up before the Ullswater hotel was chilled and shivery; which facts did not incline him to toleration, nor urge him to unselfishness.

The hall-porter hastened out as the great car stopped; and Lord Clement, emerging, dashed for the shelter of the porch before turning to ask the man snappishly whether there was a Miss Garth staying there.

"Miss Garth? Yes, sir. Young lady in the party of Mr. Strachan, the Canadian gentleman."

"Is she in?"

The porter gave a sheepish grin, as though the question were amusing. "Well, no, sir, she isn't, not at present," he replied affably.

The reply infuriated the young man. So she had gone out, had she? Perhaps this man was aware that she had gone out to avoid her visitor. He knew that he deserved to be treated in this way, and

the knowledge made him all the angrier. "Can you tell me at what time she is likely to be in?"

"Well, sir, for the matter of that, they might get back pretty soon, now. Mr. Strachan and Mrs. Varick, one of the ladies of the party, have gone in the car to fetch her home."

"To fetch her home? Why, where is she?"

"I am really not quite sure, sir. You see, she has been out all night"—the visitor jumped perceptibly—"with young Mr. Cranstoun-Brown—lost on the mountain."

"The devil she has! And where is this Cranstoun-Brown, whoever he may be?"

"I fancy he's in bed, sir, having been up pretty well all night."

"Are any of this party of lunatics anywhere about? I mean, could I see, or speak to any of them?"

The porter hesitated. "The eldest Miss Cranstoun-Brown is in the lounge, sir. All the gentlemen are in bed, I believe."

"Well, just tell the eldest Miss Cranstoun-Brown that a friend of Miss Garth's has called, and would like to speak to her, will you?"

"No name, sir?"

"No. Say I won't detain her long."

Phyllis was seated before a noble fire, wearing a rest-gown of a becoming shade. Her few days in bed had slightly etherealised her, and she was looking her best. But her mood was not happy. Cousin George and she had passed the whole of the pre-

ceding day together; and not only had nothing come of it, but she had felt a detestable conviction that the gentleman was trying to convey to her, delicately but unmistakably, the information that nothing would ever come of it.

A day or so previously, her hopes had risen to a giddy height, because he had suddenly presented her with banknotes to the value of fifty pounds, saying it was just a small sum for her to spend upon some souvenir of their tour, when they should reach a place with shops in it.

Now, as she looked back at it, she did not feel the episode to be as encouraging as it had first appeared. Veronica had received exactly the same—that might be to prevent it from looking too marked—but was it not more in the rôle of the benevolent uncle than in that of the suitor?

For a few hours after its presentation she had lived in momentary expectation of his proposal. He would naturally be diffident. He would feel that his sober years and his widowed condition were circumstances against him. He would dwell upon her youth and freshness, and urge her to make him happy. Poor old Cousin George! It was not much fun to have so elderly a husband. Naturally she would have preferred a romantic love affair. But it was worth while! She saw herself seated, clad in sables from head to foot, in the smartest car that rolled down Bond Street, attended by a skilled and devoted maid—travelling everywhere first-class, sitting, as it were, perpetually in the stalls! . . .

But now that yesterday had passed, she was assailed by horrid doubts. She wished that she had not, at once upon receiving her fifty pounds, written to order those exquisite jumpers from Debenham and Freebody! It might have been wiser first to pay back that detestable cat, Miss Garth. It was she and no other who was to be held responsible for Cousin George's defection. The poor man was simply infatuated with his crafty secretary!

At the moment that the porter entered the room, she was indulging in the exercise of a very strong and ever-increasing Hate.

His message caused her to prick up her ears. A gentleman—young—friend of Miss Garth—would not give his name. Was she by this lucky accident to be made the recipient of some dark secret, some story about the discreet secretary which should give her the whip-hand?

Burning with curiosity, she said she would see the visitor; and Clem Vyner stalked in, the very image of the young nobleman on the stage, with a precision of detail about all his accessories which roused Phyl's admiration, always so easily stirred at sight of a personable male. She was still wearing a sling, though the doctor had said she need not. It gave a touch of interest, of pathos. Faintly smiling, she half rose, begged the stranger to excuse her—she was not yet fully recovered from a motor accident.

Clem apologised glibly for his intrusion. He was staying in the neighbourhood—had been told that Miss Garth, too, was in the accident—had called to

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make sure of her not having been hurt. On the threshold of the hotel he was greeted with the news that Miss Garth had been out all night upon the mountainside. He would be grateful to be told the exact facts.

Phyl leant back among her pillows, dallying with this situation. "Well," said she, after a show of hesitation, "I don't know who you are, do I? Am I justified in talking about Miss Garth's affairs to a complete stranger?"

He looked pleased and approving. "You're a charming girl, Miss Cranstoun-Brown, if you will excuse the comment. But it's all right really. I am Miss Garth's cousin, and my name's Vyner. May I confide to you that she is one of the modern kind—set upon living her own life—and that her family are a little uneasy about her?"

Phyl's vanity began to strut. She gave the stranger a glance of sympathetic understanding which tickled him hugely. He divined that a good many men would call this girl charming in the first few minutes, and be bored to death in the ensuing half hour.

"Oh, well, if you are one of her family, I suppose I may as well tell you what happened," said she. "You see, they all went up Helvellyn yesterday."

"Pardon the interruption—of whom did the party consist?"

"My brother, my sister, Mrs. Varick, Major Doran, Colonel Morrison—and Miss Garth, who,

as I suppose you know, is secretary to my cousin, Mr. Strachan."

"Is that so? Secretary!" His voice showed annoyance, or disapproval. "Who and what, if one may ask, is this Mr. Strachan, who needs the constant services of a secretary?"

"My cousin is a Canadian—he has a very large business in Ontario. He is enormously wealthy, and has a great deal of correspondence."

"Indeed? And I understand that the whole party which you have mentioned is making a motor tour?"

She explained that this was so, and related the story of the collision on the Kirkstone Pass, which entailed the laying-up of one car, and a few days' halt in their present quarters. "They thought it a pity to be staying here and not go up Helvellyn."

"I conclude that the young men are practised mountaineers?"

"Colonel Morrison is. I think Major Doran also has done some climbing. But my brother, who got lost with Miss Garth, has never done any."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, I expect that was how it happened. The mist was very thick. It delayed the party a good deal, coming down. However, they arrived back here about seven, and told us that the two others were some way behind. They said they got separated at the top, but Miss Garth was so much the best and most experienced of the ladies that they did not worry. However, when they were about three parts of the way down, they halted a bit. The others

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were not in sight, and Major Doran suddenly remembered that he had borrowed my brother's map and not returned it. Just then, a tourist overtook them. He had been nearly all the way up, but turned back on account of the mist; and he said he had seen the two, and that they were behind him. So then they thought it was all right, and they came home. But time passed, and the others did not appear, and after dinner they went out and made inquiries, and it turned out that the couple the tourist had seen were quite different people—they came from Dockray."

"Then you became anxious?"

"My cousin, Mr. Strachan, made the most ridiculous commotion. The others assured him it was all right, but he worked himself up into a tremendous state and wanted to send out search parties at once. They persuaded him to wait another hour or two, as it seemed certain the others must turn up sooner or later. And presently it began to rain, and soon after to pour in torrents. So then he insisted upon a search party; and Major Doran and Colonel Morrison went with them. Mr. Strachan had such a severe cold that he did not go; but he paced the hall and would not go to bed."

"Well, please go on."

"Well, between one and two in the morning, my brother turned up soaked to the skin, alone, riding a bicycle. He had left Miss Garth at a small inn at Threlkeld."

"Threlkeld? How in the name of all that's wonderful did they reach there?"

"They got turned round somehow, in the mist, and came down the wrong side of the mountain—mistook the other lake—do they call it Thirlmere?—for Ullswater."

"Great Scott!"

"Yes, and they couldn't hire horses. They did get food at an inn, but it seems all the horses had been hired for some Government Survey, so they had to walk to Threlkeld; and the rain set in, and the weather was so wild they were almost blown off their feet. When Miss Garth arrived there she was dead beat; and still they could get no horses. So my brother thought the best thing he could do was to hire a push-bike and ride here to let us know she was safe. He said they were giving her a hot bath and putting her comfortably to bed when he left. He had no map, and had never been that way before, and the rain and wind kept putting out his lamps, so it took him hours to find this hotel. Oh, Mr. Strachan was angry! I have never seen him angry before; he is usually most sweet-tempered; but he rated Gilbert almost unfairly I thought. After all, I don't suppose Miss Garth will be any the worse for it."

There was a slight pause, while Clem digested these tidings.

"And where," he presently asked, "are they all now?"

"The men are in bed and Mr. Strachan and Mrs.

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Varick have gone in the car to fetch Miss Garth back."

Clem pondered, then took a decision. "I think," he said, "that in these exciting circumstances I will not wait to see Miss Garth this morning. She will probably be feeling a bit cheap and out of curl when she arrives, won't she? And as I have a bone to pick with her, I had better select some other moment. Do you know how long you will be here?"

"The chauffeur thought they would finish the car to-morrow, and if they do, we shall be off the following day."

"Well, then, I think I will look round to-morrow. But, I say"—he paused abruptly, rose, went to the window, stood there a minute holding his hat behind him, then came back to the fireside and the interesting invalid—"can you keep a secret, Miss—er—Langton-Brown?"

"Cranstoun."

"My mistake. Forgive it. You look as if you could keep a secret all right, you know."

"I would keep yours," avowed Phyl, blushing quite becomingly.

"Well, then—h'm—Miss Garth is my *fiancée*, you know."

Phyllis gave a cry of unquestionably real amazement. "Miss Garth *engaged!*" she gasped. "She—*engaged?*"

"Pardon me, but why should the fact excite such surprise in you?"

"Oh, I don't—quite—know. But she seems so

very disengaged somehow. I have always thought she meant to marry Cousin George, if she could."

Clem laughed, very low, but so superciliously that the tone pierced through even Phyllis's obtuseness. "I think not," said he good-humouredly. "Miss Garth is having her fling. When she has lived her own life as long as it amuses her, she will return to her own people—be sure of that."

"Well! I am very much surprised," murmured the girl, quite bewildered. "She has never spoken of you—she wears no ring."

"That is all part of the pose, and it amuses her while it doesn't hurt me," he replied. "She and I understand each other. Well, now, Miss Lang—Cranstoun-Brown, will you help me a bit? You were loyal to her—wouldn't give away anything till you knew who I was—be loyal to me too, and just tell her that her cousin, of the name of Vyner, looked in this morning, but did not wait. Don't tell her I am coming again to-morrow, but, if it lies in your power, arrange so that I may see her when I come. Dare I ask you to do this for me? Somehow I believe I dare!"

CHAPTER XXII

CHARIS REJECTED

THAT rainy, cold morning broke upon a Charis to whom life seemed a terribly tortuous path.

It was late before her eyes unclosed, for fatigue had insisted upon its way, and in spite of the turmoil of her soul she slept and slept, curled up in the convolutions of a vast feather bed, with a stone hot-water bottle at her feet.

With her waking two facts forced themselves pre-eminently upon her mind: the first being that she was, or ought to be, the affianced wife of Gilbert Brown; the second that she had, without effort, succeeded in eluding Clem and his threatened visit.

This latter thought induced for a few minutes a mood of profound peace; but, although she had once more disconcerted her pursuer, she knew she could look upon this relief as merely temporary . . . and now everything was complicated by her weak behaviour of the past evening. In the wan light of the overcast skies, and the anxious mood which is frequently the result of trying to think when in a recumbent position, the idea of being Mrs. Brown's daughter-in-law showed itself as monstrous, not to be thought of. Gilbert had known this. How?

. . .

. . . Oh, if she persisted in rushing off into specu-

lation as to how Gilbert knew things he ought not to know, she dare not guess where she might find herself in the end. How did he know the exact tone of voice which would shake her—the very words which would melt her. . . . Above all, how, she wondered, how, by what inconceivable magic arts, had he learned to kiss with his soul upon his lips? . . .

There, all alone in that bleak little bedroom, Charis Osbourne felt the tingling blood suffuse her at the memory.

It must be delusion, she passionately affirmed. That man—that suburban product, that steadily-stolidly, jolly bank-holiday clerk, who had gone to the city every day until he went to the war, and as soon as the war was over had returned to his season ticket as the dog returns to his——

——How, she asked of the unresponsive heavens, could this man's spirit burn with a clear steady flame which, while they were together, lit up all life for her with the light that never was on sea or land? How could his large, roughly-cut mouth unlock for her the gate of such sensations as she had never known, nor thought to know?

Could all this be for nothing?

She repeated to herself, as if it were a formula with which he had provided her: "When you were in your sober senses, you had no sort of use for me. You refused me without hesitation. When I am gone you will wonder what possessed you to tie yourself up to a fellow you don't love."

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"Do I love him? No, I don't believe I do. It is only that I appreciate, with an appreciation which is almost agony, the quality of his love for me. All my life I shall never be so loved again."

Had she but someone in whom she could confide! But there was no one. For she knew that Strachan would say exactly what his cousin had said, only far more strongly. He had been quite certain that she would—must—reject Gilbert. That she should do otherwise would be a blow to him—of what kind she declined to specify to herself; only she knew that he would be utterly unable to find any sort of reason for her action.

Then there was her father—bless him! She could picture his round-eyed distress; and Bertalda, her father's wife: "Oh, dinky daughter, isn't this out of the frying-pan into the fire? What is the gentleman? A grocer? Does he wear a white apron in business hours? Surely, dear, poor Clem is of your own tribe, after all." Charis could almost hear the silky, purring voice. And there was her aunt, Lady Orsover, Clem's mother, starving in genteel poverty, until Charis's money came to the rescue. What advice was she likely to give, poor soul?

But all these, her nearest kin, would have but the one verdict. "Unthinkable!"

Then why hesitate?

She need see Gilbert but once again—perhaps for a few minutes only, in the presence of others. Then, it would be over.

. . . And what after? What of the tour, wrecked

far more completely than the car? What of her own future, since the masquerade, as Doran had warned her, was wearing very thin?

She knew Doran well enough, now, to understand that having gathered that she desired no revelations, he would make none. She could rely, both upon him and Morrison, not to tell tales. But she was in their hands; not a nice thought—oh, not a bit nice . . . and anything might happen. Suppose, for instance, that Clem encountered Morrison that morning, in the hotel? Then the fat would be in the fire with a vengeance. There would be nothing for her to do but slink home to Bertalda, and her "I told you so!" Home to another onslaught from the Orsover lot, to a bullying which, she resolved afresh, should never end in her marrying Clem.

"I wouldn't so much mind marrying him if I only disliked him; but I despise him," she thought ruefully, as she pulled the bell to summon the chambermaid, her mind further from a settlement than it was when she began.

There was a knock at the door, and in response to her "Come in!" there appeared, not the chambermaid she had summoned, but the sweet little face of Sheila Varick, carnation-pink after her run in the car.

Charis gave a little gulp, the other girl ran forward, and they embraced with a heartiness which was a little surprising to both. Then Sheila grasped the arms shrouded in the landlady's coarse linen

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nightgown, and gently shook Charis, with a very wicked expression.

"Well, my dear, so here you are, and apparently sound in wind and limb! I do trust you have not sown the seeds of a deep decline, as your raging millionaire seems to expect!"

"What nonsense!" sharply, with crimson face. "I have never been in one minute's danger! How soon did he know where I was? What time did Gil get in?"

Sheila put her hands over her ears. "No questions! I am dumb until you come downstairs. Do for goodness' sake hustle into your clothes—they are dry, and lying in a pile on your mat! Hasten down to pacify him—and don't be alarmed if he should eat you alive, for he is like a raging and a roaring lion!"

CHAPTER XXIII

STRACHAN'S DISPLEASURE

NEVER in all her life had Charis entered a room with such misgivings, such self-consciousness as she felt that morning when she crept downstairs to confront George Strachan.

He was roaming restlessly to and fro from parlour to passage, wearing his motor-coat and holding his watch in his hand—ready to start for home the moment she should appear. His face was curiously pale, his eyes seemed sunk in his head. They held her gaze as if they would pierce her inmost feeling. She was aware that he was furiously angry, but it was at once apparent that this anger was by no means directed against her.

After a curious moment he took her hands, his eyes still searching her face apprehensively, as if for traces of over-fatigue or of resentment.

"My dear, I can't tell you how I feel about this hold-up. I beg to offer my sincerest humblest apologies——"

"Well!" she cried, smiling with an easy gaiety which seemed at once to surprise and to reassure him, "this is funny, you know! I thought it was I who would have to apologise! Why, I did a thing

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yesterday of which anyone used to hill-country ought to be ashamed to the last day of her life! I *am* ashamed, and quite ready to own it! But the man at the inn by Thirlmere said other people have done very much the same thing——”

“The responsibility does not lie with you, my dear, but belongs to that blundering ass, my cousin, Gilbert Brown. However, thank God you seem none the worse, so come along—we’ll get you back safely, give you a glass of champagne, put you to bed, and then——”

“And then, I should think, pack me in a box with cotton-wool and dispatch me back to London labelled ‘Useless’! Really, Mr. Strachan, except that I’m afraid you were anxious, I haven’t a regret. I enjoyed the whole of it, even the walk to Threlkeld in the wind and rain! But for our bad luck in striking a day when there were no horses to be had, our adventure would have been nothing at all; we should have got home by about eleven! Poor Mr. Brown had the worst of it on that bicycle. I hope he isn’t feeling very done up——”

“He hasn’t got a tenth of what he deserved,” was the harsh comment, as Strachan shepherded her and Mrs. Varick into the car.

“How good of you both to come,” went on Charis, rallying him. “Did you expect to find me raving in brain-fever? It is a relief that you don’t seem to look upon me as a nuisance—for you really might! A secretary should never, *never* behave as I have done! But do me the justice to remember,

Mr. Strachan, that I begged and prayed to be allowed to stay behind yesterday."

"Yes, and it would have been better had you done so. I see that now. But I gave Gilbert credit for more discretion. I warn you that my faith in your judgment has had a nasty knock. You told me he was trustworthy. What should I do with that fellow in my business?—clumsy, self-seeking, wrong-headed——"

"Take care," broke in the girl; and she was surprised at the anger which suddenly shook her. "Don't say such things. Mr. Brown was the best of companions. I am very glad he was with me——"

"Thank you, my dear, but you need not trouble to say things like that to me," was the reply, in tones of such concentrated bitterness that she flushed brightly, and, turning to the much-puzzled Sheila, changed the subject abruptly.

It was past midday, and they paused on their homeward journey when they reached Dockray, and had lunch at the comfortable little hotel, where one is waited on by such charming girls.

When they reached Ullswater, half an hour later, most of the hotel guests seemed to be in the lounge to acclaim their arrival, and to be assured that Miss Garth was none the worse for her exploit.

Strachan, however, would not allow her to linger a moment. It seemed that there was something on his mind which he must utter at once. He took her arm and piloted her through the crowd to the sit-

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ting-room, which he had reserved throughout their stay for the use of his party.

If he expected to find it empty he was disappointed, for the others were all there, the men leaning over the table, poring above a large-scale map upon which Gilbert was showing them the track of his wanderings.

There was a chorus of welcome as they entered, and a good deal of chaff from Doran and Vee. Phyllis, sitting by the fire, smiled at the thought of the bomb she had in her hand, ready to throw. For this there was at present no chance, for the buzz of talk was incessant. Charis herself said little, however; she was standing in a kind of stupor of irresolution, her eyes upon Gilbert, who, after a grave greeting, had given no sign and would not look at her.

He was holding fast to their agreement, determined to show that there was nothing between them. She gazed upon him in a pathetic bewilderment, searching his heavy face for some sign of what he was feeling, trying to realise that this almost loutish young man was the only one in her life so far who had shown her what passion meant.

Those moments at the inn had so wrought upon her that she experienced a disturbance in all her being, the result of merely being in the same room with him. Because he was there, she could not feel detached, nor completely mistress of herself, but was conscious of an urge, a compelling impulse, as

though there were some definitely magnetic quality in his heavy quietude.

She was forced to shake it off, for she was called upon to give a detailed account of their proceedings.

"We can't get a word out of Gil," she was told, "we want to know how you came to let us pass out of your sight."

"I really don't know, except that we were so interested in what we were talking about," she avowed, "and——"

"What *were* you talking about?" asked Vee at once.

"I don't quite remember, but I *think* it was Bergson—wasn't it Bergson, Mr. Brown?"

"A sufficiently nebulous subject," dryly commented Doran, "to create a mist all around you, even had there not been one already."

"Bergson! What do you know about him, Gil?" asked Vee contemptuously.

"More than I did yesterday," returned her brother with provoking calm.

"It was entirely the fault of you others, and not ours at all; in fact, we are graciously prepared to receive an unqualified apology," said Charis, swiftly carrying the war into the enemy's country. "We called loudly enough, and begged of you not to move until we had rejoined you. We could hardly hear what you said in reply, and you at once hurried off, quite out of earshot."

As she foresaw, this highly provocative statement produced instant argument, denial and recrimina-

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tion. The party averred that they could hear Gilbert quite clearly, that they thought he was making a fuss about nothing, but that they had bidden him come on, and they were prepared to maintain that he had replied "Right you are!" The reasons why Morrison and the rest could hear clearly, while the lost ones could hardly hear at all, were debated with animation.

This gave time to Charis to collect herself a little, and ask herself what she intended to do. Gilbert evidently meant to leave it entirely to her. She was free to say what she liked. It was Strachan who was flying the danger signals, and his demeanour surprised her considerably. He was enraged against Gilbert to the point of declining to hear a word in his defence, and this seemed excessive. With the exception of the scene at the inn, of which Strachan was ignorant, it was difficult to see what fault could be found with the young man's behaviour.

For the first time she asked herself whether it was possible that Gilbert's innuendo of the previous day might be true—that Strachan was seriously his rival. Jealousy, real raging jealousy seemed the only thing to account for the fury of the gentle George.

The thought was to her almost ridiculous. That she, Charis Osbourne, should have resisted without effort more than one suitable applicant (as Miss Austen might call them) only to succumb now, either to a Canadian lumber merchant or his extremely bourgeois cousin!

Yet she knew that never had she liked a man as well as she liked Strachan, and never come half so near to loving one as she had come to loving Gilbert Brown!

Involuntarily she put her hands upon the arms of her chair as though she felt herself slipping into an abyss. What could she do? Go back to Ringland, and take up life as she had known it before her excursion into the ranks of the workers? Oh, never, never! With the revulsion of distaste came the thought of Clem. Had he called that morning, and how had he taken the rebuff of her absence?

Phyllis, seated at her ease opposite her, smiled maliciously as she watched the evident uneasiness of mind.

Since the departure of the mysterious visitor, Miss Brown had not been idle.

He had left her in a whirl of excited fancy. Never had she seen a young man so exactly suggesting the ideal hero of a novel. The thought of his being engaged to her cousin's secretary—the designing minx who was setting her cap at Gilbert, as no one but herself seemed to have the sense to perceive—filled her not only with envy, but with genuine incredulity. It was not possible, she told herself.

After cogitation she had dragged herself from her basking, out into the lounge, upon the off-chance of extracting some information from the porter. Her success was staggering, even to herself. Did he know, she inquired, the name of the gentleman who had called upon Miss Garth?

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"I didn't, miss; I'm new here this season. But Mr. Ball, he tells me it was Lord Clement Vyner."

"Lord Clement Vyner?"

"Yes, miss. He came in one of the Ringland cars. He's his lordship's nephew. Mr. Ball was telling me his lordship's sister married Lord Orsover. Lord Clement's her second son, miss—brother to the present marquis."

Brother to a marquis . . . and engaged to a typewriting girl! It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Phyllis tottered back to her fireside. Here indeed was food for scandal, for upon the face of it such an engagement was obviously impossible. Some relationship evidently existed between the two—but not a fair and square, above-board betrothal.

Her novel-fed imagination caught at the idea of a liaison such as she felt sure must be the true state of the case. The young nobleman, the too attractive business girl! It was easy to piece out the story. There had been a quarrel. She had run away. His errand to-day was probably to coax her to return. Certainly he had seemed quite annoyed at the idea of her being in Cousin George's employ. Phyllis was too well read for the situation to seem to her in the least unlikely, though, as far as her own experience of life went, she had to own that she had never come across any such arrangement; nevertheless she firmly believed it to be quite common in what she vaguely termed society.

. . . And this was the girl who had managed to suppress her past and had obtained a post among

what Phyllis indignantly described to herself as "respectable people." She would now have no scruple in unmasking Miss Garth. She deserved anything that might be the result—deserved to be packed off without a character. That such a course might fling her back upon the protection of the man with whom Phyllis supposed her to have guilty relations never crossed her vindictive mind. That she herself owed it to the girl seated opposite that her own dishonest transaction had been successfully kept from her mother's ears was nothing to her in that moment. Her whole being was filled to bursting with the notion that she could now counter Charis's machinations where Strachan was concerned.

It was her plain duty to let him know upon what kind of person he was lavishing his confidence and his kindness.

CHAPTER XXIV

CHARIS CUTS THE KNOT

CHARIS, deeply sunk in cogitation, lifted her eyes with the sudden consciousness one sometimes has of being minutely studied, and found Phyllis's small hard eyes fixed unwinkingly upon her. She had a moment's dread. Those eyes seemed to her like the eyes of the snake—"Move and I strike; keep still and I choose my moment."

What was the import of that look? What threat did it hold over her? . . . Had Phyllis seen Clem? Had she found out all about the masquerade?

For some long seconds Miss Brown kept her on the rack, until a sudden lull in the conversation gave her the chance she sought.

"It was a pity you chanced to be away this morning, Miss Garth," said she distinctly. "Your fiancé called to see you."

Charis sprang to her feet. She said exactly what Phyllis had expected. "My fiancé! *But I have no fiancé*—that is—I *had* not. . . . What do you mean?"

Her confusion was plain and acute. Phyllis smiled.

"A gentleman called here this morning to see you.

In your absence he asked to see me. He would not give his name. He said he was engaged to you. Surely he wouldn't have said so if it isn't true?"

Charis's glance swept past the fixed and immobile attention of Strachan to the face of Gilbert, watching her with an intensity of suspense in which he hardly seemed to breathe. In contrast to the demeanour of these two she felt the other units of the audience to be merely negligible. To justify herself in Gilbert's eyes was, frankly, the one thing needful.

"The gentleman who would not give his name was completely mistaken," said she steadily. "You will understand that I cannot be engaged to him when I tell you that I promised yesterday to marry Mr. Brown." As she spoke she gave a swift little smile, a slight motion of the hand. It brought Gilbert stalking across the room to her side.

"That is so," was his brief contribution to the situation.

Strachan, who had been seated, rose from his chair with a bound, his eyes ablaze. "No, by the Lord," he muttered under his breath. "Not so bad as that—never that!" And after checking himself with a desperate effort of self-control as his eyes swept the ring of faces, he added, "Such an arrangement can never have my approval."

Phyllis's heart leapt up joyfully. After all, as her mother had once profoundly remarked, blood is thicker than water. Strachan was not so blinded by the wiles of this little adventuress as to be callous.

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when she proposed to become a member of the family.

"Oh, Cousin George!" cried Phyl, "I knew you would help. You will do something to prevent this. Think of how distressed poor Mamma would be—her only son . . ."

The two men, Doran and Morrison, were so petrified with astonishment that they simply had no words. One looked at the other in stupid amazement. Lord Ringland's heiress and Gilbert Brown! That was to them fully as much out of the question as Lord Clement and the secretary had seemed to Phyllis.

Only Vee's voice was heard, and she cried stoutly, "Rot, Phyl! If they want to get married why shouldn't they? My dears, I for one congratulate you!"

Sheila Varick would have added her voice to this, but she was too occupied with the aspect of George Strachan to have any eyes for the audacious pair. From crimson he had turned to a dull grey, and was evidently labouring under so strong an access of feeling that she wondered if he were going to fall down in a fit. However, in a minute or two he had forced back his excitement and could speak, though slowly.

"I dislike to be inconsiderate . . . but I am going to ask all of you except Gilbert and Miss Garth to go out of the room. I will have nothing more said, nothing discussed, until I have obtained the full information which I think I may say is my due."

"It is your due," said Gilbert in a perfectly composed voice, "and I know I speak for Miss Garth also. The others will go and smoke in the lounge."

As he spoke he opened the door, and after a moment's surprise the others obediently went out, headed by Sheila Varick, and Phyllis last of all. As she went she turned to her cousin.

"George, dear, let me stay—surely I ought to know——"

"Go, if you please, and quickly," was all the reply he had for her. She cast a look of deep malignity at Charis as she went.

The three were left confronting each other near the fire.

Gilbert had not so much as touched Miss Garth's hand. He merely stood there, his big frame tense, his face wearing the look of one who has at last completely made up his mind and intends to act upon such decision.

The unexpected strength he displayed only served to accentuate Strachan's displeasure. No sooner had the door closed, and the young man returned to his position at the side of his betrothed, when his cousin, advancing a step towards him with clenched fists, said heavily:

"You hound!"

This was too much for Charis. "Mr. Strachan," said she gravely, "I think you are overwrought. I know that you had a bad time on our account last night. Had you not better go and rest for a few hours before discussing this?"

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"No. We will dispose of it now——"

"Please forgive my interrupting, but is it for you to dispose, as you call it, of Gilbert and me? Don't think me ungrateful, but indeed this is a matter in which I must be allowed to judge for myself."

"Just so. That's what I mean. You have not been allowed to judge for yourself. You have been driven and bullied into this—bondage—by an unscrupulous young ruffian who led you away from the others in order to have you to himself for hours so that he could work upon your feelings . . . although he knew exactly how you felt, because you had already given him his answer. Isn't that so?"

She was ready with an indignant denial, but Gilbert forestalled her. "After all," he said, "I think the person who should speak first is I." He turned then to Charis with a restraint and deference which impressed her afresh. "Have I your leave to speak?" he inquired.

Afraid to trust her voice, for her throat swelled suddenly, she nodded, and let herself sink into a chair, leaning her chin on her hand.

Gilbert faced his cousin squarely. "George, all that you have just said of me is true, with one important exception. I did *not* manœuvre to be left alone with Miss Garth. I knew she would not have wished it, and I am not sure that I even wished it myself. The thought uppermost in my mind all day was that she should feel no awkwardness from having turned me down just before. Our being isolated was sheer accident. In justice to me I must ask you

to believe that. It is the only thing I can urge in my own favour. When the danger was over, and we found ourselves together in an inn parlour, awaiting our food, I did take unfair advantage of opportunity, just as you reproached me with having done. I"—for the first time he faltered, and a few words came thickly as he was shaken with memories—"I extorted a promise from her, and afterwards, when my head cleared, I knew I was precisely what you have called me—a hound. I apologised at once, saying I knew I had behaved disgracefully. I said I would on no account hold her to that word. After some argument we left it in this way. We were not engaged, but if, having slept upon it and further considered it, she—she should feel that she *could* . . . well, then, it would be for her to say so . . . and . . . she *has* said so."

"Yes," assented Charis, as though she spoke mechanically, "I have said so."

Strachan stood looking down upon her. His face was working with many different emotions. Then he said harshly to Gilbert:

"You have done what I can never forgive. You have, as I consider, betrayed a trust. I do not wish to have such a man in my business, nor to have anything more to do with you. Now, do you still intend to hold her to what she has said?"

"I never intended to hold her to it," replied Gilbert gently. "But what you say is, of course, conclusive. If you mean that you withdraw the chance, the business opening you were giving me, my pros-

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pects are simply nil. An engagement with no hope of marriage is a strain I would not inflict on any woman, least of all the woman I worship. Charis is perfectly free."

Still she did not look up nor change her pose, and as if to sting her into showing her face Strachan demanded acidly:

"Is it true that you are, or have been, engaged to another man?"

She replied to that without looking up. "Yes, it is," she replied. "If you were to say that I was bullied into *that* you would be speaking the literal truth. He is my first cousin, and I never cared for him in—that way. I broke it off about eight months ago, and he does nothing but pester me. I went away—disappeared—in order to be out of his reach. Until quite lately I let my father know always where I was. But then I found he told my stepmother, and she told Clement, so I told them they must write to me through my bank. I was determined to put an end to the persecution. I—I—Mr. Strachan"—lifting her tearful face and her beseeching hands—"I simply *won't* marry him," she said sobbingly.

Strachan took the hands, and his voice softened in spite of himself. "Well, well, who said you need? Are he and this great oaf the only men in the world? Come, let us have an end of this deplorable episode. I'm in a position to keep you safe from any young cad who tries to foist himself upon you against your wish. We'll go out of England if you like—we'll go to-morrow—what is to prevent us? Why couldn't

you have been a bit more explicit? We need not have come so near the danger zone."

She withdrew her hands in order to wipe her eyes. "I thought we should just be passing through and not stopping hereabouts," she explained. "It was the accident on the Pass which gave me away. There was a passenger on the coach who knew me by sight. But it was detestable of my cousin to force himself upon me after the letters I have written to him." She felt in her coat pocket and produced the telegraphic form. "See! I wrote that yesterday, forbidding him to come, but we had to start in a hurry, and I got no chance to dispatch it."

Strachan glanced at the message, which was addressed quite simply to "Vyner, Ringland." Ringland is a hamlet as well as a castle, and the words gave him no clue.

"Well," he said soothingly, "I think you are abundantly justified in keeping out of the way of this young scoundrel, but you need not take such a desperate course as to engage yourself to another man simply because he has badgered you into it. There is no occasion to make up our minds at this moment where we will go—France, Switzerland, Scandinavia—you have only to say the word. But to-day, immediately, we will be off from here, and will go to Mrs. Nicholson's at Fratton Beck. Those for whom she has no room must return home. I can arrange that quite simply. So now, my dear, your way is clear, I think. Gilbert has very properly given you your

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liberty—take it. Tell him you made a mistake, and that will be the end.”

Charis lifted her wet lashes and somewhat desperately searched Gilbert’s face. There was no appeal in it. His jaw was grim, and the line between his lips tight. She knew that he was prepared to suffer anything rather than plead for himself; but well she also knew the passion that rent the depths of him; and he could not quite control his eyes. A captive soul, almost despairing, transmitted some message to her, whether he would or no.

She drew a long breath, and knew with a shock that the moment for full confession had come.

“Please will you both sit down? I am going to tell you something. It’s—it’s something that I am heartily ashamed of.” Her voice sank very low. “I ought to have told you of it, Mr. Strachan, before coming into your employ, but I doubt if you would have taken me if I had. . . . And I ought not to have allowed Gilbert to make love to me until—until he knew—who I am.”

The final words were almost whispered. It was not to be wondered at that both the men who listened imagined something far removed from the truth. Gilbert broke in abruptly.

“Nothing would have made any difference as far as I am concerned. If you confessed that you are a German spy—or—or a divorced wife, nothing matters. Don’t speak at all if you feel the least reluctance.”

Light broke over her expressive little face. The

misery of perplexity gave way to a beam of pure joy. "Gilbert," she murmured, "you are very splendid." For a moment Strachan was forgotten. The two gazed upon one another, oblivious of time, of place, of all but their two selves; when she spoke what she said was:

"But the truth is something you may find it harder to forgive than either of those two things."

Strachan's hand clenched suddenly. There floated into his mind the trifling incident of the visit of a lordling of some sort to the Trenby Hostel. He recalled the way she had displayed agitation. A young lord, and a far too attractive typewriting girl! Into his perturbed mind there floated for a moment the horrible suspicion which had occurred to Phyllis. Violently he rejected it. Something in Charis enabled him to know that it could not be true. Yet it shook him.

. . . And then he heard the girlish voice, with a new note in it, a tremulous, calling note he had never heard before.

"Gilbert! I want your hand to hold!"

Gilbert slipped from his chair to his knees upon the rug beside her. He took her hand between both his own. To Strachan the sight was almost intolerable. But he put strong constraint upon himself and remained calm.

"Now I am not quite so frightened," said Charis, smiling wanly. "But still I feel very nervous. To begin with, you—the man I have promised to marry—don't even know my name! I have been passing

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all this time under an assumed one . . . and it is my real name which I am afraid to tell you—afraid it will vex you, for I——”

So far she had proceeded when a very emphatic knocking at the door broke in upon her difficult words.

CHAPTER XXV

EXIT MISS GARTH

UPON Strachan's summons to enter, the door opened halfway, and the face of Sheila Varick was seen. Its expression showed that her errand was urgent. She came quite in, closing the door behind her, before she said:

"Forgive me, but Miss Garth is wanted at once. Her father has called to fetch her, and he says I am to let her know that it is a matter of life and death."

Charis leapt to her feet. Her half terrified, half mischievous sense of the probable effect of the revelation she was about to make was merged in the shock of these words. She turned white as she faced the messenger.

"Dad!" she breathed. "Dad has come to fetch me! Oh, it must be awfully serious!" For a moment she seemed stupefied, and her hand went out towards Gilbert.

"But perhaps he could wait five minutes. I'll go and find out exactly what it is he wants."

"He wants you, my dear. He has come to fetch you home at once—this instant," said Sheila gravely. "He is waiting at the door with the car; he would not even come inside the hotel lest he might be

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delayed. He asked me to tell you not to wait even to fetch anything from your room—to come just as you are.”

Charis was still wearing her hat. Gilbert picked up her coat and put it on her. He also had turned very pale, but he said nothing. She cried brokenly:

“Oh, this is dreadful! I can’t think! I am all in a maze! Gilbert, if something awful has happened, I can’t—I simply can’t tell him about us now, can I? You won’t think me a coward? You will wait here? Ah, you *will*”—turning with vehemence to Strachan—“you will please, *please* await news from me here! I will either send for you or write or—or perhaps come back. Your letters—Gilbert will do those for you.”

“Miss Garth, I think you must leave Mr. Strachan’s letters to take care of themselves,” softly said Mrs. Varick, clasping the girl’s hand. “Be advised, and come this moment.”

Charis seemed still to hesitate, but Gilbert took command. He laid his hand upon her arm above the elbow, gently propelling her towards the door where Sheila stood watching them, her face full of compassion. As Charis passed the glowering Strachan she paused, flung up her arms round his unbending neck, and kissed him without a word. Then she let her lover lead her from the room.

As they passed through the lounge Doran and Morrison respectfully shook hands and Vee kissed her. Phyllis had subsided, with the shock of the news she had just heard, upon a distant settee, and

could not even rally sufficiently to make any kind of obeisance to the rising sun.

Just outside the door stood a big grey and purple car with two menservants in grey liveries with purple facings. Before it, strolling impatiently to and fro upon the gravel, was a man of about Strachan's age, with a well-cut, humorous face, whose expression at the moment was that of profound melancholy. As he saw his daughter approach he turned, and the two faced each other for a moment without a word. Then Charis descended the two steps which divided them, stood a-tiptoe, and kissed his lordship meekly.

"I'm not ready, Dad, but I'm here," said she in a crushed voice. "Please let me present you to Mr. Strachan and Mr. Brown."

Lord Ringland raised his hat with a disarming and courteous gesture. "Both these gentlemen will pardon me," said he, comprehending both in the salute, "when they know that my wife may be dead before we arrive at home. My daughter and I will take care to forward all proper acknowledgments at the first opportunity," he added, addressing Strachan. "Come, my dear girl——"

In a moment, as it seemed, Charis's slight form had disappeared into the grey interior of the car, her father had followed, the chauffeur had touched some magic lever, and the whole equipage vanished along the level road to Pooley Bridge, leaving behind them an empty-seeming silence.

After watching them quite out of sight, Strachan turned and re-entered the hotel. He passed slowly

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through the lounge, and as he went there was that in his face which prevented anyone from addressing him. There was a murmur of excitement passing to and fro, and after his disappearance the talk was lively.

" . . . Never understood that the young lady in Mr. Strachan's party was Miss Osbourne . . . thought they called her Bath or Garth . . . the celebrated Miss Osbourne . . . declined to marry her cousin, didn't she? . . . Yes, you know, something queer about the entail—has to go to any male descendant if there is one—to a daughter only on failure of all males—and Lord Clement is heir-at-law, his elder brother, the marquis, waiving his claim. . . . Didn't get on with her stepmother . . . rather eccentric girl . . . went off to study life at first hand . . . not a bad tip if you have Ringland Castle to fall back upon if things go wrong . . . it seems her ladyship is ill . . . wonder what's the matter?"

The millionaire stalked on, above the groups of tattlers, along the corridor to his own bedroom. He had something of the feeling of one who has been soundly, delightfully asleep in a train and awakens to find that he has been carried on past his station. The whole unsubstantiality of his relations with his late secretary was borne in upon him with hateful suddenness.

In these few weeks he had grown to be completely wrapped up in her. He had not looked be-

yond the present moment. She was his delight, his pastime, his interest, his object in life.

Yes, alas! his object in life. And now, in one second of time, she had been taken away, and he foresaw that return was impossible.

All this time she had been playing with him. She had made an excursion out of her own *milieu*. It was just a freak, a whim. But how finely, how thoroughly carried out! He had never employed a girl who worked with anything like the conscientious intelligence, the diligent application of Charis.

In his ignorance he had believed himself a benefactor. Insensibly to himself he had begun to assume paternal authority over her. He had played with schemes of adopting her legally and ensuring to her a portion of his great wealth.

Now, one after the other, she had dealt him two shattering blows. First, she had shown him how utterly independent of him was her heart and her desire, and then her very physical presence was snatched from him.

. . . And now, what could come of this latest entanglement? What of Gilbert Brown's fatuous thrusting of himself into the situation?

When he thought of the view her father would probably take of the whole matter he ground his teeth. It would be hard for his lordship to believe that young Brown had really been ignorant of his daughter's identity. His wrath against the young man blazed anew, forming a kind of outlet for his miserable sense of desolation and injury.

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Gaining his room he turned the key upon himself, found a match and kindled the fire which was ready laid. Then he sat down beside it and gazed drearily from his window out upon the leaden lake and the cold, creeping clouds which sulked upon the heights, belying the fair name of June.

He could not even smoke, so smitten was he with a sense of utter futility.

Through the formless future his mind began presently to grope, for he must decide what to do next. He thought he would wait at the hotel until tomorrow, when he might himself go in his car to make inquiries at the castle for her ladyship. Then he would take his two nieces and carry them to Fratton Beck to pay the promised visit to their Aunt Nicholson. Doran could continue his tour with his sister and Morrison in their own car, and Gilbert might go to the devil.

Gilbert! How dared he? In what way could the sacrilegious idea have entered his thick head? A cat may look at a king, but a Gilbert Brown may not aspire to a woman like Charis. For a moment he found it a consoling thought that he, Strachan, had been able from the first to perceive the outstanding quality of the girl he had befriended in such odd circumstances.

Lost to him for ever! He wrung his hands in the pain of the thought. He was indeed a Jonah, doomed to lose everything on which he set his heart. As once he had said to Sheila, he had the money—and that was all.

Sheila Varick! At the thought of her the one ray of comfort entered his mind. He had seen her eyes as she came to take his ewe lamb from him, and they were full of comprehension and of pity. She, like him, had given her heart and been bereft. She stood in a different category from these other young creatures with the world before them.

Someone knocked at his door, then tried it.

"Who's there?" he growled.

"I am—Gilbert, and I hope you will let me in. I want to say something of importance."

"Go to the ——" began Strachan before he could control himself, and the reply came promptly:

"Yes, I am going there as fast as you could desire. I want you to help me."

Strachan stared, angry enough, but perhaps a little amazed at the effrontery of the man he had taken for a clown. Then he realised that in his present mood it would be a relief to tell Gilbert exactly what he thought of him. He rose, after two or three denials, and admitted him.

Gil came in with that same new air of poise and assurance which had descended upon him when Charis publicly announced their engagement.

"Sorry to be a nuisance," said he quietly, "but I want to try and make you see that there is really no need for you and me to be at cross purposes."

"You must know, without my repeating it," broke in Strachan sourly, "that you have settled yourself finally where I am concerned. I wish to have nothing more to do with you."

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The contemptuous words brought a dull colour to the set face, but the young man answered temperately. "I don't admit the justice of your condemnation of me," he said unemotionally, "but I am not going to try and vindicate myself, if that is what you are afraid of. What I am here to ask is that you should help me to deal with the entirely new position created by our knowledge of Miss Garth's true identity. Naturally, all idea of a marriage between us is now out of the question. I should not even wish it. To be looked down upon by my wife's family would be to me detestable. . . . By the by, did you know that both Doran and Morrison have for some time known who she is?"

Strachan was struck by this. "Is that so? Why did they give no hint?"

"I wonder that you should ask that. If she chose to be incognita, was it for them to give her away? Her secret was her own business."

Strachan glanced at his cousin with something like respect. Gilbert's attitude impressed him, angry though he was.

"That's so, certainly," he replied reflectively. "It was your sister who went back on her."

Gilbert merely shrugged his shoulders. He would not voice his opinion of Phyllis's mentality.

"Well, what of it all?" demanded Strachan wearily after a pause.

"She always told me there were obstacles—obstacles which I could not see and she could not explain," went on Gilbert. "You heard her say just

now that I might find the truth harder to forgive than if I discovered anything against her character. There she was quite right. I do. I have to own that. I resent the part that she has played. I resent her coming into our family, sitting in the worst place at table, listening to my poor mother spreading herself about the best society in Streatwood, laughing in her sleeve at all of us. . . . But that's not the point. We have to face the fact that today, in her splendid generosity, she gave out, in the hearing of the whole party, that she was engaged to me. I wonder if you see what I mean? As far as I am concerned, the whole situation is changed, because I now know what I did not know before. But from her point of view nothing is changed, because when she said we were engaged she knew herself to be Lord Ringland's daughter as well as she knows it now. It follows that she will think she ought to hold to her word."

He paused. Strachan turned it over in his mind. "Well, what then?" he said at last.

"It is obvious that I cannot jilt her. It lies with her and not with me to break off an engagement she has herself announced. Surely it will occur to you that it would be much easier for her to do so if I were to clear off out of her way?"

Strachan's attention was caught.

"For me to hang about here must embarrass her cruelly. I know well enough, better than you can tell me, that I never ought to have let her know what I felt. But do me the justice to remember that

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I thought I was in love with a girl with no home and no money. You may never have known what it is to love all at once with a force that drives you on as if you were a straw; if you have, you ought to admit that what I have done was more a blunder than a crime, and a blunder that has wrecked me once for all."

"I'm sorry for you," his cousin conceded rather grudgingly. "But what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to take back what you said to me this morning about withdrawing the offer you had made me. I want you to send me to Canada, as you promised. George, for God's sake, help me! If I can get away—right away—it may just save me from going mad, and at the same time it will relieve her of the consequences of her mistake. She knew it was my intention to go, and she knew it was urgent for me to go at once. She won't think I am bolting, and—and she will have time to reflect what a foolish girl she has been . . . and then, of course, she will forget. For she doesn't love me—how should she? She was only moved by the depth of my love for her. . . . I tell you," he cried with sudden vehemence, "if I thought otherwise, if I knew she loved me, her grand relations and your money might go to the devil, and I would stand by her and take her and support her somehow! . . . But she doesn't love me really. . . . And so after a bit she'll be grateful to me for—shall we say spreading my one cloak in the dirt so that she may

walk dry-shod over the little muddy place in her clean life?"

As he listened to this appeal Strachan knew that he was unexpectedly moved. As his cousin spoke there even came to him a glimpse of perception as to what moved Charis to consent to this man's wooing.

When the deep, reluctant voice faltered into silence the millionaire stood up. He held out his hand.

"Gil, I reckon I have misjudged you. I am free to own it. I take back most of what I said this morning. You go to Ontario at once as my representative."

Gilbert caught the hand as though it had been a life-line.

"You are a good sort. Somehow I thought I could make you understand. I gather that you will let the whole arrangement remain as we planned it the day before yesterday—the car may run me over to Penrith at once to catch the London express? Then I shan't have to face them all downstairs . . . and I can write to—Miss Osbourne—from London."

"Give your own orders, Gil. She was right all along. She told me from the first to put my money on you, and I will."

CHAPTER XXVI

BERTALDA'S ACCIDENT

IN the car the father and daughter, as soon as they were out of sight of other people, fell into each other's arms. Charis was overwrought, tired, excited, torn with doubts. She burst into tears, and for a few minutes sobbed her heart out against his lordship's rough frieze coat.

He is to be pardoned if he believed that this display of emotion was entirely the result of the return of the Prodigal Daughter, and in a few minutes she had pulled herself together to the extent of gasping out a desire to know what was the trouble at home.

"Bertalda," he told her with a curious effect of nervousness. "Poor child! Poor child! I feel like a murderer!"

"You, Dad! Why, what have you done to her?"

He cleared his throat and did not reply directly. "She—she has had an accident," he stammered.

"An accident? Your fault? Motoring?"

"No, no. Merely the result of her pernicious habit of wearing those terribly high heels on our slippery oaken stairs. She fell downstairs this morning—running to hear what news Clem brought back—and——"

"Fell downstairs? And is she much hurt?"

"She is exceedingly ill. Dr. Frost is in attendance, there is one nurse already in the house, and I have wired for another. I have left Frost with full discretion to telephone for a surgeon—they think an operation may be necessary, but cannot tell as yet. Anyway, they told me nothing could happen for several hours, and advised me to go and fetch you." He ran his long, sensitive fingers up through his hair. "I felt I simply couldn't face things without you, Cissie."

"Oh, Dad! Poor Dad!" Miss Osbourne clutched at him. "I am a selfish pig! I hate myself! I never should have left you. I certainly didn't think it would be for so long. You know, old thing, if you had written and said that the Orsovers were finally choked off and Clem had agreed to behave rationally I would have come home like a shot!"

"I am aware of it, my daughter. The difficulty all along has been Clem himself. You see, the poor wretch is really in love with you—that's the trouble. It isn't a question of the property. Your Aunt Eleanor says you are the only hope for him—that without you he would go all to pieces. You may not credit it, Cis, but she did actually go on her knees to me in the library, begging me to wait until you had tasted hardship and loneliness long enough to be glad to come back home on any terms. She has all along maintained that it was only a lover's quarrel——"

"But, Dad, you knew better than that!"

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"Not for certain. Not until Clem showed me your last letter to him. Then I knew. I told him it was all over. Whereupon he fell into such a state of mind that poor Bertie insisted upon keeping him at Ringland lest he should go and do something foolish. Most superfluous. Clem isn't that sort, as I told her. But there were reasons that made her feel sorry for him . . . so he stayed on with us."

"And you were bored stiff. Don't fib now."

"I fear he does bore me, Cissie. No denying it. One day Bertie had her pony-carriage down in the village, and Mrs. Hunter, the doctor's wife, came up to her, said her daughter had seen you in a motor accident—at least, she could have sworn it was you, but you denied it. Bertie came home with this story, and after that there was no holding Clem. He was in a fury, and vowed he would make one final attempt to get you to hear reason, and if it failed he would drop the whole thing.

"So he went off this morning and returned about lunch-time. Bertalda was so anxious to know how he had sped that she came running out of her room, caught her foot, as I have told you, and fell a whole flight."

His voice, as he gave this information, was full of agitation which he could not conceal. Removing his hat, he wiped drops from his brow.

"I packed him off," he went on harshly. "I had had about enough of him—he had done more than enough harm to me and mine. He went off to the

station there and then, and the car brought back the doctor. So you need not be afraid of finding Clem at home when we arrive; and I wish to Heaven this fool would drive faster."

He leaned from the open window into the rain, which was now falling fast, and called to the chauffeur to increase his pace. The car was negotiating a narrow, winding road—one that leads from Pooley across the hills near Lowther—and to obey was rash, but, hearing his lordship's tone, the man took the risk. On they rushed for a time in utter silence while Charis marvelled at the way in which she had underrated her father's attachment to his wife.

She was feeling—like Bottom—translated. Here, in one instant, she had entered a world wherein all interests, all persons, all topics of conversation were different. Already the memory of yesterday was growing, not less distinct, but certainly less immediate. It was beginning to seem more distant.

She was puzzled about Bertalda. That fine, healthy young woman! It seemed odd that she should have been so fearfully injured simply by falling down a flight of stairs. And why should Lord Ringland consider himself responsible? She longed to ask for more details, but feared to torture her father with questions. Now that the effort of coming to fetch her was past, now that he had her beside him and could relax, his mind flew back to its devouring anxiety, its immense preoccupation. His lips were dry; and when he sat up and, as if

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determined to show his self-control, lit a cigarette, his hand shook.

"And what," he demanded after a long silence, "and what have you been doing, Cissie?"

"Mischief," she replied gloomily. "Horribly serious mischief. It's no joke, Dad, to go experimenting with life. I've made that discovery since I left you."

"Then your adventures will not have been wholly in vain," was the dry retort.

She leaned against him. "Dear old man, cheer up. I know we shall find things better when we reach home. It was a strain for you to come away in the midst of it all."

"The doctor advised it . . . something to do . . . one could only wait and go mad."

Suddenly he snatched her into his arms, holding her fast. "Little girl, I would have cut the knot of your difficulty," he muttered. "I took a tremendous responsibility, and it seems that Providence has decided against me."

She thought he would have said more, but his voice sank under the stress of what he was going through. So they sat silent and motionless while the car swept in through the widely flung lodge gates, where the lodge-keeper peered with awed interest for the return of the Prodigal Daughter, and up the exquisitely kept avenue, out upon the wide sweep of gravel bordered with shaven lawns and glowing flower-beds.

As they drew up before the great doors the

elderly butler, his face darkly flushed with excitement, ran out upon the marble step and stood waving his arms with a total forgetfulness of dignity and decorum.

"My lord, my lord!" he cried almost before they could be expected to hear. "It's all over"—Charis turned cold and shivered—"it's all over, and oh, praise God, it's a boy—a son and heir, my lord! A son and heir!"

CHAPTER XXVII

ALTERED CIRCUMSTANCES

LORD RINGLAND stood a moment rigid, poised between extremity of joy and the horror of an awful thought. He turned so pale that his daughter thought he was going to faint. He laid his thin, fine-drawn hand upon the sleeve of his old servant's coat.

"Her ladyship," he managed to say; but his voice was a mere whisper.

"Her ladyship has come through, my lord, and Maddermosell tells me the doctors are very hopeful. She's that delighted, they say, it just makes all the difference to her chances—in fact, my lord, as I said, there's every hope."

"And the child . . . healthy?"

"As fine a boy as was ever seen, so they tell me and"—the old man's voice was husky—"I heard him myself kicking up enough noise for two——"

Ringland shared the quivering smile upon Wright's face. For a minute or two the pair, who had lived in the same house for so many years, stood locked in the bonds of a silent sympathy. Then Ringland drew a long breath, passed his finger over his hot brow, and turned to face his daughter with an air of confusion which she found delightfully amusing.

"Oh, Dad, how clever you have been—you and Bertie!" she cried, running to hug him. "I never had the teeniest suspicion of what has been going on! Congratulations, darling, from my heart! My little brother! How wonderful that sounds—*my little brother!* Isn't it splendid, Wright?"

"It's almost as good to see you back here, Missie, if I may venture to say so—where you ought to be," replied the butler half reproachfully, half fondly, as he preceded his master into the low, spacious hall with its Tudor pargeted ceiling and massive beams.

"Cheek!" cried Miss Osbourne, pretending to shake a fist at Wright, "but I won't box your ears now, I am too full of excitement. A son and heir! It doesn't seem possible!"

She saw her father lift his head and flash a glance about him as though he now saw his own possessions for the first time. His eye was full of a new fire. "How long ago?" he inquired in a hushed voice.

"Not more than a quarter of an hour, my lord. Maddermosell said by the time you and Miss Osbourne had taken a cup of tea the doctors would be ready to talk to you."

The new-made father glanced hungrily up the stair. "I mustn't see her ladyship yet, I suppose?"

"Not at present, I gather, my lord. You see, it has been, as you might say, touch and go; but my own opinion is that my lady is much stronger than the doctors give her credit for, and that she'll make

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a fine rally. After all, it's not more than a week too soon," added the old man deprecatingly.

Ringland stood there in a dream, hesitating, wistful, forgetful for the very first time since her birth, of his cherished daughter's presence at his side.

"But surely I may see the youngster?"

"By the time you've had some tea, my lord, nurse will have dressed him."

Charis felt tears well up to her eyes. They were not evoked by jealousy. Rather was it a vast sympathy which she felt. It was to her own surprise that she found she could enter into her father's feelings. How hard and unsympathetic she had been wont to show herself in those old days when she was the apple of his eye! How selfishly she had left him, not once so much as considering whether he would miss her! Now all her outer crust of hardness seemed melting in warm and unaccustomed emotion. Yet she could not express what she felt—she was tongue-tied because dad seemed to have grown suddenly remote—a new man—the father of a son!

They went together into the boudoir which was Bertalda's own special room, and sat down before the tea-tray. Both were curiously silent—the man because it was hard for him to digest the amazing delight with which he was permeated—the girl because she was feeling battered, exhausted, as a result of what she had gone through during the past forty-eight hours—an experience of which her father was utterly ignorant.

It was not until he had eaten and drunk—Wright

told her he had had nothing since breakfast—that he leaned back contemplating his daughter, who sat curled up in the deep cosiness of the Chesterfield, with Bertalda's chow snuggling against her.

His first thought was of triumph at having lured the wilful girl back to her home. His next was a somewhat marked disapproval of her general appearance.

Charis wore the frieze suit in which she had made the ascent on the previous day, and it bore a shrunken and shrivelled aspect, having suffered from the rough and ready methods of drying employed at the Threlkeld hostelry. Her hat was crooked, her hands not particularly clean, her hair decidedly rough.

"Oh, Chu Chin," said she, squeezing the little dog playfully, "your nose will be out of joint now with a vengeance!"

Her father started. Talk of noses being out of joint made him a trifle uncomfortable.

"Cissie," he said, "I fear this has been sprung upon you somewhat unmercifully. Have you thought what this—this event—means to you?"

"I should just think I have!" she responded gaily. "It is my salvation! Good-bye to Clem's worrying, and greeting to my freedom!"

"Hardly just of you, Cis. Clem's in love with you all right."

"But, most fortunately for me, Clem's mamma is not. Quite the contrary in fact. It is she who has been egging him on all this time; and when she hears the news—which you must send her at once—she

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will call off the hunt with all possible dispatch and keep her boy at home until she has selected another heiress for him. Oh, I assure you, with Aunt Augusta as my ally instead of my opponent, I have no fears at all."

His lordship's face fell. "I'm sorry for Augusta. She's very hard up; and so am I, as you know, Cis. That's the rub. I shall be obliged to make a new will to-morrow, and with what I must leave the boy, to enable him to carry on, you won't be much of a match."

"Which seems to show my wisdom in turning out to earn my own living, and, what's more,—'making good'! Why, I'm independent! Do you know I am earning twenty pounds a month, with board and lodging thrown in? Some job, don't you think?" She lowered her lashes naughtily, eyeing him from beneath. "I'll confide something else to your puissant lordship. I don't believe I am boasting when I say that at this moment I could take my pick of three husbands, concerning two of whom I can assert with confidence that they had no suspicion at all of my identity."

Her father turned his fine, tired eyes upon the dishevelled young person curled up on the pale brocade cushions, with her mud-stained boots hanging just over the edge.

"You surprise me, Miss Osbourne," he remarked with irony, "that is, if you have been accustomed to go about among them in the guise you are now wearing. Bertie would have a fit if she could see you."

Charis sat up and instinctively pushed her hat a little straighter. The colour flew to her cheeks, and she laughed as if abashed. Rising slowly she went to a Venetian mirror and contemplated herself for some minutes without speaking.

"Well!" said she at last, "I am indeed a sight for the gods! I shall have to get Bertie's Fifine to take pity on me. However, this puts the coping-stone upon my triumph! In just these habiliments, they being at the time soaked with rain, I was not only wooed, but most ardently wooed—when was it? Yesterday evening? Is that possible? No longer ago than that?"

For a long minute she stood staring at her reflection with a curious expression. She saw nothing that her outward eyes beheld. She was in a small dingy inn parlour, with a horsehair sofa, upon which she sat, while a man, disproportionately big for the room, paced to and fro. There was emotion washing like a high tide about her, sweeping her away . . . and then there was actual submersion, while for the first time a man's strong mouth met hers, and for the first time she sensed the power of the force she had called up and now was powerless to subdue.

With fatal clearness there rose before her the wonder of the man's renunciation. With his passion at mid-flow, with her words of consent in his ears, he had felt the unspoken rebellion in her and answered its demand. He had as it were caught himself by the throat, wrestled with, and thrown

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himself . . . yes, thrown himself . . . at her feet! The grandeur of it shook her. Her lip went down like a child's. Her exhaustion was about to culminate in a burst of tears when her father's frigid tones brought her sharply out of her dream.

"So I have snatched you away from an atmosphere of courtship, have I? May I ask who did you the honour to woo you, as you tell me, yesterday?"

She answered in cut-and-dried tones. "His name is Brown—Cranstoun-Brown. I believe he's a clerk in his father's office. Something to do with leather, I think."

Lord Ringland, in the act of lighting his cigar, faced round and eyed her in polite wonder. "Really, Charis," he began; and then, just as her lips were opening to cry out—"Not now, I can't bear any more"—Wright opened the door with a beaming face and ushered in the doctors, giving her the chance she craved, to spring up and hasten from the room, to summon some maid to her assistance and rummage out a frock in which she would not so obtrusively challenge her father's criticism.

Hardly had she gained the stair-head when she encountered Mrs. Wishart, the portly Scotch house-keeper, who seemed, like every one else, to wear a smile which spread from ear to ear, but accomplished the feat of growing even wider as her eyes fell upon the daughter of the house.

It was good to be greeted with loving fervour, although the greeting was an under-the-breath,

some-one-is-ill kind of affair; and then Mrs. Wishart, creeping on silent feet and with beckoning finger, pushed open a chink of door and slunk round a screen.

Followed a whispered colloquy between her and a strange nurse, rounded off by a tiny wail, indicative of the mild disgust of the infant peer at the world in which he had been somewhat precipitately landed. Then Mrs. Wishart put her head round the screen.

"Yes, Miss Osbourne, lovie, nurse says come in, only don't make the leastest noise."

And there, in the course of the next few wonderful seconds, they laid in her proud arms the heir of her line.

"Oo-oo," she cooed, tremulous and choky, "I never saw anything so young before—so *new*. They said new-born babies were ugly. Why, he's angelic—simply angelic—how is my p'ecious baby budder? Does he like his old sissie?"

She was cuddling him tenderly, coaxing the downy top of his head with caressing lips, absorbed in the miracle of birth as though it were a thing unheard of.

"Miss Osbourne makes a good nurse, doesn't she?" whispered one smiling onlooker to the other. "And——"

"Time you had one of your own, dearie," put in the housekeeper, jealous for the first-born of the house.

"Mrs. Wish, you're a shameless old thing," was

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Charis's mock-furious retort; but as she stumbled out of that room and hastened along the corridor to her own, her eyes were streaming with helpless tears.

"The last time I cried was when mother died," she told herself angrily. "I've done enough weeping in the course of this afternoon to last me the rest of my natural life, I should say."

But she had by no means done with tears that day.

As time wore on the dull ache at her heart grew sharper and more insurgent. Her mind was drawn, as though somewhere in the distance a magnet were pulling at her, to the thought of the party she had left at Ullswater—a few miles as the crow flies, but separated as it seemed by all the gulfs of prejudice and restriction. . . . Gilbert's face arose before her continually, as last she had seen it, with what Browning calls a "griped jaw" and eyes smouldering with some emotion decidedly more pronounced and fiery than mere regret . . . something she could not interpret to her own satisfaction.

Naturally enough, her father did not at once revert to her disclosure of her love affairs. His whole mind was saturated with his happiness, and the position of his finances gave him serious occupation. His mind was a-simmer with a hundred schemes with regard to the new dispositions he must make of his property when his lawyer came out from Appleby. His head buzzed with plans and designs, for he was determined to set aside enough every year to enable

his son to live without anxiety, and to nurse the property during as much of the long minority as he might be spared to see. Upon these subjects he enlarged with the daughter who had always been his close companion; but ever like a refrain, there broke into his discourse a little song of praise of Bertalda, the wife who had given him a son.

Quite early in the evening, Charis had had as much of it as she could stand and slipped away to soak her pillow with salt drops. She ascribed much of her depression to the fact that, dearly as she was prepared to love her brother, she yet was not quite free from the "nose-out-of-joint" pain, which is a gnawing and detestable sensation; but she knew this was not all. There was a cry in her heart to which she would not listen.

Upon gaining her own room she had found, to her joy, that her own maid, Flora, had not been dismissed, but retained by Mrs. Wishart in some other capacity in the household in view of the general belief that Miss Osbourne would certainly return home just when they least expected her.

Flora's only fault had been that (prompted doubtless by the receipt of sundry half-sovereigns) she had always been a strong advocate of the Osbourne-Vyner match.

She was now bursting with the desire to give her mistress all the latest news of what Lord Clement had said and done, and was vexed at the decision with which the subject was forbidden.

"Mark my words," said the maid the following

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night, when she was sitting (by special invitation) in Mrs. Wishart's room, busy with renovations and alterations for her mistress, "Miss Osbourne's as likely as not to veer round now that the money question isn't in it. She's romantic, I've always said so, and she couldn't bear the idea of going with the property. But now his poor young lordship's down and out, she'll think of him very different—see if she don't."

"And then," said Mrs. Wishart wisely, "the Marchioness, his Ma, will put *her* foot down."

"If she does that'll clinch it, and Miss Osbourne will marry him, whether or no," eagerly cut in Flora. "Marry him out of hand she would. Shouldn't wonder if she ran off and got married on the sly. She'll never do anything like anybody else. I'd give something to know where she's been and what she's been doing all this while. But I don't suppose we ever shall."

"D'you think," asked the housekeeper doubtfully—she usually kept her rule of never discussing the family, but present events had upset all routine—"think she's likely to settle down at home here?"

"If you ask me, no. Not she. She's in a queer mood. Seemed lively enough, but her pretty eyes were red with crying when I was dressing her yesterday evening, and this morning her pillow was damp."

Mrs. Wishart pondered. "A hotel you say they brought her away from?"

"Yes. The big hotel on the lake at Glenridding.

Well, it's a rare good thing his lordship took the law in his own hands and went and brought her back. The talk there's been in the village you'd never believe. All through that Mrs. Hunter that was in the motor accident on the Kirkstone. She said there was a tall gentleman, not young, but very distanguy, who rushed up to Miss Osbourne and lifted her out of the car in his arms. His face, she said, was the colour of chalk, and he could hardly speak for what he was feeling."

The old housekeeper blinked gravely. "Seems funny, don't it?" she reflected slowly. "However, Miss Osbourne always did take her own way and I suppose she always will. Wonder if we shall ever hear any more? Anyways, keep a still tongue in the hall, Flora, my girl."

"Let me alone for that. It's to be hoped you can trust me, Mrs. Wishart."

CHAPTER XXVIII

A CONFESSION

LADY RINGLAND gave no cause for anxiety after the first few hours. She slept all night, the sleep of the utterly content, and her condition was so satisfactory, that upon the following afternoon her husband was admitted to see her as she lay there smiling, with her son tucked into the hollow of her arm.

Almost her first words were: "Poor little Cis will be glad, won't she?"

Her husband thereupon revealed the fact that Charis was actually in the house. He added that there could be no doubt of her pleasure, and that she would offer her congratulations in person as soon as she was admitted to the Presence.

Charis meanwhile found herself, without luggage, caught in the toils of dressmaking and fitting. Flora's horror of her appearance had made her think her father mercifully lenient; and she submitted to the maid's demands as a sort of expiation of the state of disrepair in which she had made her return, "quite on the lines of the best Prodigal traditions," she remarked to herself.

It was while she was thus occupied that Wright knocked at the door with cards upon a salver.

They were Strachan's cards, and she gave a little gasp as she took them. "Mr. Strachan is here?"

"No, Miss, Mr. Strachan would not come in, although I ventured to say I knew he would be welcome. He merely called to inquire for her ladyship and for yourself, Miss; and to leave your luggage."

Charis turned white. "Who was with him?"

"Two ladies, Miss; or it might be three. I would not be sure. But two or three ladies. The car was closed on account of the rain."

"No—no gentlemen?" Her voice sounded unnatural, even to herself, and she knew Flora must be pricking her ears.

"Only Mr. Strachan himself, Miss. You will see there is a note under the cards."

There was quite a little heap of cards—those of all the party. Beneath lay an envelope, addressed in Strachan's careful hand.

She hardly waited for Wright's departure before opening it hurriedly.

Its enclosure—a cheque—stared her in the face. The amount was far larger than the fortnight's salary owed to her. The covering note was not a letter, it had neither beginning nor end. It was just a message.

"Have learned, much to my displeasure, from Phyllis Brown, that she is in your debt for a considerable sum, which she is apparently unable to pay, in spite of my recent present to her. I therefore

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enclose it, with the salary owing to you, and add my apologies on her behalf. We leave here early to-morrow morning for Fratton Beck."

That was all, but upon the envelope were a few words, evidently scribbled after making his inquiries at the door.

"Hearty congratulations on the good news. Hope ner ladyship makes a fine recovery."

That was all. She stood staring at the written words with an unpleasant feeling of having been dismissed without notice. Judging it necessary to say something to cover the sharp smart of her wounded vanity, she remarked: "Well, apparently, they've brought along my luggage, Flora. You'll be able to find some things."

"Yes, Miss. I hear it being carried up now, I believe."

Charis let the *charmeuse* frock, full of pins, glide to her feet, and stepped out of it. As Flora left the room to superintend the depositing of the trunks in the ante-room, she tried to face the future so abruptly brought before her by Strachan's conduct. What did she mean to do? What was she to make of her life, now that she was no longer her father's heiress?

With a sense of emptiness and loss she recalled Strachan's offer—so recently made—to take her away—abroad—anywhere she chose to go—to keep

her safe with him so that no marriage might be forced upon her. With a hideous sinking of the heart she realised that all that was over now. He knew who she was. She could never go back upon the former terms.

"Oh, what a beast I am," she muttered, sinking into her favourite chair. Up till that moment she had been conscious of a vague discomfort where conscience was concerned. Now she was downright ashamed of herself. She had set herself up as a judge of others. She had judged poor dishonest Phyllis, undisciplined Vee, Gilbert—yes, even Gilbert! . . . And the only bright spot in the dark picture was that, after all, she had been right in each diagnosis.

Now the tables were turned, and she was being judged by them. What sentence would Strachan pronounce? She thought he had already condemned her. Kind as he had always been, she was well aware that he was not an indulgent man. He had not built up a vast business on sloppy sentiment. He was clear-eyed, just, determined.

No doubt his affection for herself would considerably modify his view of the matter. But there was the black fact that she had come to him under false pretences. She had been at play—experimenting with life and work. He must resent this deeply. His message seemed to her to express his disgust—to emphasise the fact of his having washed his hands of her.

The fact that they were going on to Fratton Beck

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sounded as though the tour were not abandoned, but was being carried out according to schedule. What of Gilbert? After his sharp quarrel with his rich cousin—after what might be described as his complete break with him, on her account—he could hardly be still a member of the party.

Where was he then? She grew suddenly hot all over as she reflected that it was quite possible he might turn up at Ringland and demand to see her. He would be entirely within his rights. . . . She had no intention of going back upon her word. She had announced her engagement before witnesses and meant to stand to it. She now saw the urgent necessity of preparing her father's mind before the appearance of her betrothed. Her father and Gilbert Brown! It was hard to picture. She hated herself for her discomfort, but she could not shake it off.

In the quiet of the library that night, after dinner, she introduced the subject.

His lordship was at peace with all the world, and comparatively at leisure to listen to his daughter and pay a certain amount of attention to her affairs. To her own surprise she felt suddenly shaky about the knees as she opened the ball by handing him Strachan's cards.

"Strachan!" said he, reading the name with some interest. "Surely that's the man who made the munificent gift of timber to the Canadian Government, isn't it?"

"Did he? I never heard him mention it. But he would not. He is the most modest of men."

"If this is the man I am thinking of, he is astoundingly wealthy. Does he come from Ontario?"

"Yes. His business is there, though he has big estates in the Far West."

"Same man, no doubt. Was it he who proposed to you? If so, you will at least be rich—but no! You spoke, I think, of a young clerk? Some laughable name."

"But, father, you mustn't laugh at it, because it will be mine some day. I did not tell you yesterday because you were so preoccupied, but I had better make my insignificant announcement to-night. I am engaged to Gilbert Cranstoun-Brown."

Her father arched his eyebrows and broke off his cigar ash meditatively.

"So?" he said; "why is this? Defiance of Clem—eh?"

His eyes were now upon her, pretty searchingly, and he saw her pallor.

"It—it was partly that," she owned in a low voice. "Not altogether, though. Somehow he—he— isn't an easy man to say 'No' to." She gave a little nervous laugh, unlike herself. Lord Ringland's ironic eyes grew more serious.

"Tell me something about him, will you, Cis?"

"About himself—or his position and prospects?"

"Perhaps we might take the second first, shall we?"

She set her mouth uncompromisingly. "It is a case of snakes in Ireland, Dad. He has neither position nor prospects."

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There was a just perceptible pause. "His age?" questioned his lordship softly.

"About thirty."

"And he has not even begun to build up a career of any kind?"

Her answer to this came swiftly. "His country has seen to that. The Government helped itself to the five essential years of his life—the years that count! When he had done all a man could, he was pushed out—no further use for him! . . . But I must tell you the worst of it. A prospect—a good one—an admirable one—had just opened out before him. Through me he has lost it."

"How so?"

"Mr. Strachan, who is his cousin, is also a childless widower. As you have said, he is fabulously wealthy. He had just arranged—influenced a good deal by me, I believe—to take Gilbert into his business. He was to sail for Canada at once. And I suppose it was just that—I mean the strain of what he was feeling, and going so far away from me—which made him speak. Remember, he thought I was just a typewriting clerk—a wage-earner. And when Mr. Strachan heard of the engagement he was terribly angry."

"What made Strachan so angry?"

She hesitated. She could hardly own that she thought it was jealousy. "I—I couldn't quite make out."

"But I think I make out very easily. You were

the Becky Sharp of the drama. You first induced old Strachan to make the young man his heir, and then annexed him. I dislike your methods myself, my dear. I can see that they must have been most displeasing to the millionaire."

This was a new idea to Charis and it hit her hard. She did not want to believe it; but certainly the nature of the communication she had that day received tallied far better with such a view than it did with the more flattering one.

"Well," she owned slowly, "he was dreadfully indignant, and he withdrew his offer to Gilbert altogether."

"You seem to have made a mess of things—eh, Cis?"

"Yes. An utter mess."

"Of course, there is another possible reason. Strachan may have been jealous of the younger man."

"He may. But he is not like that. Not a bit petty, nor mean. He is a great man. I want you to meet him. You and he would get on, I am certain."

"Your account of him interests me . . . a good deal more than what I have gathered concerning my future son-in-law. Can you tell me anything of the young man's personal gifts?"

His fluent daughter remained absolutely mute. She gazed into the wood fire which had been kindled for them, June notwithstanding; her eyes filled and her mouth quivered.

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"You're not going to tell me you're in love with him, Cis?"

She moved suddenly, putting up both hands to her throat. Then she covered her face. "I wish I knew," she managed to get out.

For the first time, her father looked really apprehensive.

"How long ago did your—engagement—take place?"

"The day before yesterday."

"So recently as that? And what did the young man do when Strachan turned him down?"

"How should I know? We were in the midst of an awful scene when you swept in and carried me off. And now, of course, everything will be different, because they have found out who I am. . . ."

"And what difference do you expect that to make?"

"It has evidently caused Mr. Strachan to assume that my post as his secretary is vacant. He called to inquire this afternoon and left a cheque for my salary." She could not keep her voice from breaking, and bit her lip.

"And that hurts? You like Strachan, then?"

"I can't tell you how much."

"But you are not sure of your feeling for your affianced husband?"

"I won't answer that question straight out, Dad. If you can spare the time, I want to tell you the whole of my adventures."

"My independent daughter, during the past year you cannot be said to have made undue claims upon my leisure. I am entirely at your service. Confess away."

Charis began at first with hesitation, but by degrees, as she saw him interested, with more confidence, to unfold her story. He heard all about Strachan's idea that she should study the characters of his possible legatees, and her acceptance of the post without telling him who she was. He also heard the story of the tour, the motor accident, Phyllis and the unpaid loan, and finally of the Helvellyn adventure.

He gave her at first his customary half-humorous, half-serious attention, but as the tale progressed, she could see that he was being forced to some conclusion not at all to his liking. His comments ceased, his brows gathered.

When she had quite done, he arose from his seat and stood upon the hearthrug, frowning down upon her. His unspoken displeasure caused her to burst out into a passionate condemnation of Clem's conduct—of his disgraceful persecution and the false position into which he had forced her.

"You think of it as a false position? One from which you desire to escape?"

She did not reply, for she was swallowing tears.

"I must beg," said his lordship in measured tones, "that you will make up your mind on the point without delay. Because I hardly see how you are to get out of this engagement, except in a way unbecoming

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to my daughter. Do you wish to be alluded to as a professional jilt? You seem to have made your bed pretty awkwardly, Cis. But I fear that you must lie upon it."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE JUDGE IS JUDGED

THERE was little sleep for Charis that night. She was of those who are accustomed to see their own conduct largely in the light of other people's opinion. She had not been proud of herself, but she had not squarely faced the position until her father's words had fallen, like corrosive acid, upon her sensitive heart.

He disliked her methods. He had no doubt of Strachan's dislike of them also.

The more she considered, the more clear it seemed to her that he was right. What other explanation could there be of Strachan's hurried note, his half-contemptuous enclosure of the money which she could not refuse?

These thoughts were not comfortable bed-fellows, and the morning found her so weary and depressed that she gladly accepted Flora's suggestion that she should have her breakfast in bed; the more that by this arrangement she would be spared a meeting with her father, whom she knew to be profoundly disturbed and dissatisfied respecting her engagement.

The difficulty which faced her was her complete uncertainty as to what she ought to do next. If Gilbert failed to make his appearance that day—what

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then? Should the move come from him or from her family?

Flora re-entered in the midst of her perplexities, carrying a tray-load of good things. Tucked into the daintily folded fringed napkin was a letter. With a movement of the heart so violent as to trouble her, she recognised the square, unduly black handwriting which she knew to be Gilbert's—writing which, as she once told him, always looked as though he were angry with his pen.

Here was solution of at least a part of her problem. Gilbert had made the next move. He had written, and she had an absurd desire to cry with childish happiness; for here at least would be balm to her aching vanity, incense for her neglected shrine. Here at least was one in whose eyes she could do no wrong—who would find excuse for any lapse, even one far more outrageous than anything she was conscious of.

It seemed as though Flora would never leave the room. She fussed about the washstand, refolded towels, sorted out hairpins at the toilet table and even plumped up the cushions in the easy chairs before withdrawing to the next room, where she could be heard unpacking. Charis could wait no longer. She tore open the envelope, drew forth the paper and read:

“*Redmays, Streatwood.*

“DEAR MISS GARTH,—These few words are by way of farewell. I sail to-morrow on the *Escallonia*,

and, however quickly you may find that a ridiculous episode is fading from your memory, it yet might seem lacking in courtesy (after what has passed) should I depart quite without leave-taking.

"I learn with satisfaction from George Strachan that the birth of an heir to your father's property sets you free from the pressure brought to bear upon you in order to persuade you to marry Lord Clement Vyner; and consequently from any obligation to hold to the desperate alternative of considering yourself engaged to me.

"You must, I feel sure, have derived considerable amusement and experience from your plucky adventure into the nether world. We seemed, no doubt, a fearful kind of wild-fowl to you. 'Our manners have not that repose which stamps the caste,' etc.

"But I can and will spare you reproaches or taunts. I will merely own that, as you foresaw, I find the truth harder to forgive than any of the contingencies I had imagined.

"In spite of which I will avow myself,

Sincerely yours,

"GILBERT CRANSTOUN-BROWN.

"How the 'Cranstoun' must have tickled your keen sense of humour!"

Charis felt as though she had been flayed alive. With a gasp she fell back among her pillows, shivering, sick, agonised. Yet she knew at once that she ought to have foreseen just this; that she had, as a

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fact, suspected it, though she would not admit to herself the nature of her fears.

What next? What next?

He wrote from Streatwood. He was sailing—when? and whither?

Was he going to Ontario after all? Had Strachan and he been reconciled after her departure?

She guessed that this must be so. The urgent point was to decide what to do. And first, to decide what she *wished* to do in the matter. She took up the letter. It was dated with the man's usual precision at 10 A.M. on the morning of the preceding day. He must, then, have left Ullswater quite shortly after she herself had done so. And he was sailing at the present moment—he *had perhaps already sailed*.

It was then, at that actual moment, that the scales fell finally from the eyes of Charis and she knew her own heart at last.

It was Gilbert . . . or no man.

Her mind, however, refused to act at once. It seemed to be whirling about in futile circles. She felt utterly helpless and crushed under the weight of her punishment. The thought of never seeing Gil again, worse, of dragging out her whole future life under the weight of his scorn, afflicted her even to the extent of vertigo. She was obliged to lie quite still, both hands above her thumping heart, a vague wonder drifting through her brain as to whether this meant death.

Slowly she rallied from the numbing force of

the blow, and by degrees breathed more freely, while the mists cleared and the tumult of her heart subsided.

A weak voice called for Flora, and the maid, entering, stopped short in horror.

"Mercy, Miss Osbourne, are you ill?"

Charis assented without words, and Flora fled to Mrs. Wishart for sal volatile.

When it was administered her colour improved, but still she lay there like one stricken, and Flora begged to know if she had had bad news.

She admitted it. "I'm in trouble, serious trouble," she owned tremulously. "I don't know what to do. Do you know where his lordship is, Flora?"

"His lordship's out with Hazelrigg, Miss. But hadn't I better send for the doctor?"

This suggestion was opposed with a violent negative. In fact, it so roused the girl as to pull her together more speedily than might have otherwise been the case. She had heard unexpected news, that was all—so she explained her attack. In every other respect she was perfectly well.

Like many confirmed country dwellers, Lord Ringland was an early riser. He always breakfasted at eight, and this morning he was off with his agent, busy inspecting, calculating, estimating—viewing his property entirely from the standpoint of his successor. Charis knew he would not return much before lunch. Was there nothing which she could do?

Her thoughts flew to Strachan—but he was at Fratton Beck, in the most remote corner of Tees-

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dale, and she did not know where to send a telegram. A wild idea of sending one to Redmays crossed her mind. But it was a hundred chances to one that Gilbert would have left before it arrived; and she felt very sure that he had said nothing to his mother of his short-lived engagement. It would be worse than useless to telegraph there. Her one hope was Strachan.

When she faced the problem of what to say to him, however, her courage sank. Almost anything would be easier . . . she wondered whether the boat sailed from Liverpool or Southampton. Wild ideas of taking the car and rushing thither without delay floated through her mind. She had the sense, however, to send for the Times, and ascertain that the sailings of the Flower Line steamers were all from Southampton, though she could find no mention of the *Escallonia* in her haste.

Something, however, she felt that she must do. After many discarded attempts she composed the following message:

"Have pity, delay Gilbert's departure till I have seen him. Act instantly."

She then wrapped herself in her kimono, went to the telephone in her father's dressing-room and dictated the message to the post-office. They told her the nearest office to Fratton Beck was Woodlands-in-Teesdale, about two miles distant from the Rectory.

Having done this—the only thing she could think of—she returned to her room, bathed and dressed,

and crept to the nursery to distract her misery with the sight of the beautiful infant. She seated herself beside the cradle, wherein he slept the sleep of the replete in an odour of violet powder, and curved her arm about the cradle head as if therein lay all the comfort in a cruel world.

The weather was improving, the clouds were parting, the sun of June was pouring hotly over the lovely prospect outside the windows. For the first time in a fortnight, England was having a glimpse of summer.

* * * * *

"Gilbert! Gilbert! Gilbert!"

Her heart reiterated the name. There was no help for it. She was his, and at last she knew it . . . and he had flicked her contemptuously aside and turned his back upon her. He thought of her slightly, as a despicable thing—seeming gold which turned out to be mere gilding.

Her head swam in a maze of confused feeling. When the nurse peeped in and, with the air of one conferring a dukedom, whispered that if she pleased she might slip in and see her ladyship for a few minutes, she rose, hardly conscious of where she was going, and entered the dainty, carefully garnished room like one in a dream.

Bertalda lay, as it were, on the crest of the wave. She had never anticipated the completeness of her triumph—this glory which was hers as the mother of the heir. She looked the part, was dressed for it, was living up to it. Her surroundings of rosy silk

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quilts, glittering silver, snowy linen, vaporous *crêpe de chine*, were all exactly in the picture.

With the perversity which makes one see exactly the detail to which one would fain be blind, Charis marked upon her finger a certain ring, a family heirloom, which her father had kept in reserve for his daughter. Now—what could be too good for the mother of his son?

"Why, daughter, how ill you look!" murmured Bertie in her usual tones of lazy mockery.

"I'm feeling a bit cheap," admitted Charis, forcing a smile. "Haven't quite got over my adventure on the mountain, I expect. But don't let's talk of that—let's admire your magnificent son."

Bertalda owned demurely that she had never supposed a new-born infant could be so extraordinarily attractive; and then nurse bore in the treasure and laid him on the bed, and the two hung over him examining his fingers, his toes, his features and his complexion, with the absorption which is customary.

"I wish I knew what you've been up to, Cis," smiled Bertalda presently. "Aren't you sorry you gave poor old Clem the mitten? If you had been engaged, he couldn't have backed out, you know."

Charis smiled an elfin smile. "Wouldn't Aunt Gus have loved me? I imagine her to-day in the private chapel at Orsover, thanking whatever gods there be for her, for the marvellous escape Clem has had! No, my dear, you know better than to suppose I could grow pale for Clem's sake! When you

are better, dad will tell you of the mischief I have been up to—got my fingers burnt—that's all."

The luncheon gong rolled through the house and she got away without more said. Her father was in the hall as she ran down, and he, too, exclaimed at the sight of her "Hallo, Cis! What has happened?"

She grasped his arm. "Come here—into your den—a moment. You'll be p-p-leased, I expect! It's all over—I'm—I'm—I've got the chuck, as one might say."

She thrust Gilbert's letter into his hand, and stood there strained and breathless as he read. One perusal seemed not enough for him. From beginning to end he read it twice, while she felt as if time stood still. Then he shrugged his shoulders as he folded it with precision and held it out to her.

"The gentleman can hit hard," said he. "I feel sorry he is not to be my son-in-law. The man who could write that letter has got stuff in him. Dear, dear, what a pity! We might have got on together!"

He took her lightly by the arm to pilot her into the room where lunch awaited them. In the hall Wright met them with an orange envelope upon a salver.

Charis snatched it, tore it open, read what was written, looked up at her father and turned so pale that he put his arm round her to support her. She was not unconscious, but her head fell limply against his coat, and she was for the moment quite incapable of speech.

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Lord Ringland took the message from her hand and read:

“Regret *Escallonia* sailed eight o'clock this morning.—STRACHAN.”

CHAPTER XXX

STRACHAN'S SUGGESTION

THE wife of the vicar of Fratton Beck stood at the window of her drawing-room gazing across the moor in the direction of Cauldron Snout for the first sign of the returning party, that she might tell Hannah to make the tea.

The sun, which showed up the shabbiness of the vicarage furniture, seemed to rest lovingly upon the cloud of white hair which rippled on Mrs. Nicholson's head. It was hard to believe that she and Mrs. Cranstoun-Brown were sisters.

Mary Nicholson, married at nineteen to a man who was both highly educated and well-bred, had developed and gone on developing in an upward direction. When first Strachan met her, he felt a real kinship, and told himself that now he knew whence Gilbert derived. The nephew curiously resembled his Aunt Mary about the brow and mouth. The idealist—always crushed down and trampled upon in Gilbert—had been cultivated in his aunt. Her face had that beauty which is owed solely to expression—as though a lamp burned behind, and the whole countenance were suffused with its light.

Welcomed by the simple hospitality of the pair, Strachan wished he had come hither sooner.

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Though Mrs. Nicholson understood none of what had happened, she nevertheless acted as a soothing balm to his aching heart.

There was no pretence—the frugality of the household could not be hid and no attempt was made to do so. The thought of how best to relieve these two from pecuniary anxiety for the remainder of their days diverted the rich man's broodings and gave him a new interest.

The sound of a car rushing up the Dale was quite a usual one in summer time, and Mrs. Nicholson took no notice of this one until it turned in at the vicarage gate.

A tall, elderly man emerged, who could be heard—the window being open—inquiring for Mr. Strachan. Learning that he was out, he asked that he might be allowed to await his return; and at that the hospitable Mrs. Nicholson went into the hall, greeted the stranger kindly and led him into the sitting-room, explaining that she was expecting Mr. Strachan back at any moment.

The party, in fact, materialised almost at once. They all walked in together, those staying at the inn having come for tea to the vicarage. Lord Ringland, already most favourably impressed by his hostess, was quite struck with the charm of Strachan's face. He briefly explained who he was, and did not fail to note the chill and stiffening of the Canadian's manner when he heard the name.

Hospitably pressed to sit down to tea, he had an opportunity to observe all the members of the party

in which his daughter had travelled. Morrison was, as he already knew, a friend of his nephew Clement Vyner. Mrs. Varick he found charming. When the vicar appeared, dusty and thirsty after a long tramp to an outlying farm, to minister to a sick parishioner, he proved to be as unusual and interesting as his wife and their cousin.

With all but Strachan, his lordship was soon on friendly terms. Veronica and Sheila asked after "Miss Garth" with demure faces but merry eyes; and permitted their smiles free play when they found the visitor quite prepared to be chaffed about his daughter's disingenuous behaviour.

Tea over, he rose, and suggested that Mr. Strachan should stroll down with him as far as the beck. Strachan assented, markedly without enthusiasm. Cigarettes were lighted and they moved off together.

No sooner were they gone than comment broke out from all the talkative party.

"So that's his lordship!" This from Vee, always first to put in her word. "He's very like her, isn't he? Has that same habit of smiling with his eyes. . . . But my! Hasn't he got the grand manner! Did you notice, Aunt Mary?"

"I notice that his manners are better than those of the present generation," smiled her aunt; "but then I may say that I usually find that to be the case with men of his age. Your Cousin George, for example."

"Trust auntie to have a dig at us," laughed Vee,

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"when all the time she's thinking what an amusing crowd we are! But you liked him, didn't you now?"

"I think he acted very properly in coming to visit George," was the composed rejoinder. "I think he would have acted still more properly had he come a day or two sooner."

"Mr. Strachan did not give him an effusive welcome," smiled Sheila.

"George is proud."

"His cousin Gilbert resembles him there."

"I'm sorry not to have seen Gilbert," said Mrs. Nicholson regretfully. "He was such a nice boy when last he stayed with us. He seemed to love the moors and not to find it at all dull here."

"How odd," remarked Phyllis. "He was always complaining that Streatwood was so dull."

Like many of poor Phyllis's remarks, this one brought the conversation to a close by reason of its sheer ineptitude.

When the two gentlemen were presently seen returning, Strachan's face had taken on a decidedly more genial expression.

"Mary, my dear," said he as he entered, "can you contrive to do without me for a day or two? His lordship wants to carry me off to Ringland, and I have accepted his invitation."

* * * * *

Charis lay out in the hammock, under one of the great cedars which are a feature at Ringland. It was nearly eight o'clock (summer time), and the

sun was still above the horizon, dyeing the waters of the lake in splendour.

She was feeling utterly beaten down with misery and loneliness. Her father had been absent for hours and hours, and she had passed the livelong day in solitude, but for the interludes of heir-worship in the nursery.

She had found by now ample time for introspection, and the result was a depression which daunted her. She knew that she dare not face this life of doing nothing. Whatever chanced, she could not remain at Ringland, consuming herself with unavailing regret. She was beginning to emerge from her stupefied state, and to feel an intensity of wretchedness such as she could hardly have thought possible.

At last she heard the sound of the returning car. It ceased its purring at the gate which divided the garden from the park, and she guessed that her father was walking thence. She watched for him to come into sight round the big rhododendron clump. Two gentlemen, of much the same height and build, came slowly into view, walking in deep confabulation. One was her father—the other——

With a glad cry she sprang from the hammock, flew across the smooth-shaven lawn and grasped Strachan by both hands.

"You? You? How topping! Where do you come from? How did you get here?"

"I come from Fratton Beck, and your father did me the honour to fetch me. He told me he had a little girl who was fretting herself ill, and as I was

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responsible for her hurt, he indicated that it was up to me to see what could be done. Why, my child—my dear child—what have you done with yourself?" as he marked the underlined eyes, the heavy lids, the white cheeks. "No more of this, you know."

"Then—then you're not angry with me? You haven't dropped me for ever and ever?"

"Now what in this little old earth put into your head the idea that I was angry? No, indeed. Far from it. I did not dare to butt in, the British aristocracy being a thing I have no experience of."

"Humbug!" As she smiled up at him the tears were beaded on her lashes. "Oh, it is good to see you! I'm starved for news—real sensible commercial news—news of the business! I'm eating my heart out to know—have Greely and Mason gone back on the Assinanga contract? And did you, after all, get your price with the Cosmopolitan Transshipping Company?"

Her father broke into laughter. "So these are the things which really interest you, are they? No wonder I couldn't hit on a congenial topic! But you must wait for the answer to these thrilling questions until I have taken Mr. Strachan up to his room—or we shall have Wright employing his strongest known protest—bringing the dinner-gong out upon the lawn!"

* * * * *

"Now," said Strachan gravely when, dinner over, he had wandered with Charis down to the lakeside,

and had watched the slipping away of a herd of fine deer, startled by their approach. "Now, Miss Osbourne, let us get down to bedrock."

"As long as you call me Miss Osbourne, you'll never get anywhere near bedrock," was the swift retort. "Please—I'm Charis to you . . . even though I never shall be to—*him*."

Strachan watched her with eyes quickened by love. "I want the truth then, Charis. This white face, these tears at night—are they really for Gilbert?"

She made a funny little growling sound, gazing at him half-defiantly, half-despairingly. "Oh, laugh at me as much as you like! I feel like a savage squaw whose husband has licked her with a thick stick, and who therefore grovels before him! Gilbert has scourged me with knotted rope—every cut of the whip has bitten in so deep that the least touch is agony. And—and I think I deserved it. But that he will never know."

"Never know?"

"How should he? One could not reply to such a letter as he sent me."

"I wonder—would you let me see it? Your father, apparently, thought it remarkable."

Without embarrassment, as if it were the most natural hiding-place in the world, she drew the letter from within her low bodice and handed it to him.

"My God!" burst out Strachan. "Gilbert's a lucky man! Oh, he has the world's chance, and yet

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he hasn't the sense to take it! Presumes to sit in judgment upon you—you."

She smiled with wry mouth. "I sat in judgment on him, remember—for weeks and weeks . . . but do me the justice to admit that I always appreciated him."

Strachan perused his cousin's letter with unmoved face. "And you say you have not replied to this?"

"Certainly not. What could I say? Would you like me to beg of him to give me another trial?"

His eyes pierced her. "Then you have decided to whistle him down the wind?"

"Now, sir, don't presume," said she, softly and lightly, but with an undercurrent of strong feeling. "You have pried behind the scenes and looked at my raw wound. But it's going to heal. What do you suppose I'm made of? Am I the one to knuckle under to the brute who knocks me down with a cudgel? Oh, I hope you know me better! If he had been patient—or tender—or—or humble, as he ought to have been—things might have been different. As it is . . . after to-night, we won't mention it, please."

"We shan't get much chance to do that," drawled Strachan, gazing with narrowed eyes across the lake. "I'm off again directly. Had a letter from Greely and Mason which has made my blood boil; and I've got to catch a boat out to Canada in a month's time from now. Do you know—laugh at me, won't you?—I funk going over without my secretary. All these

matters have passed through your hands, and it seems kind of lonesome to grapple with them without you."

Without looking at her he saw the sudden leap of all her being at the chance held out . . . it was quite a long time before she said:

"It's a pity I can't go with you. "I—I never thought our time together would have ended in a month's salary in lieu of notice."

"I never meant it to end so. If it does, it will be your choice, not mine. Personally, I see no reason, things being as they are, why you should not come out with me. I realise that you must wait for the state christening of the future baron; but that would suit me well. Mrs. Varick wants to see Canada, and said, if I could persuade you, she would avail herself of our escort. And I don't think your father would see any objection. Think it over."

CHAPTER XXXI

DREAMS; AND THE AWAKENING

IT was late evening, but hardly dusk, when a car drew up to the broad steps of a great house in Ontario, and Strachan, alighting, helped out the two ladies in his charge.

His English butler, husband of his Canadian housekeeper, stood upon the steps to welcome him.

"Well, Marks, how goes it?" asked Strachan, shaking hands kindly with his servant. "You have carried out my instructions? Mr. Brown does not know that we are expected?"

"No, sir, he don't," replied Marks cheerfully. "Mrs. Marks and me, we haven't named it. Nor he hasn't seen any preparations; but then he's hardly ever in the house, except when he's asleep."

"Indeed? I hope he's not overworking, Marks?"

"Well, sir, he's pretty regular at the office, and I have heard he's making things hum there," said Marks with a smile. "But he's what you might call caught on in society here, and he has invitations enough to last him his lifetime. Well, sir, and I will say you look well! England's done you a power of good, as I felt sure it would do."

"Yes. I feel a great deal stronger for the change, thanks; and now—you were saying—where is Mr. Brown at this moment?"

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"Mr. Cranstoun-Brown came home a little before five, changed into flannels at once and went off to tennis at General Moore's. I am expecting him back any minute, and have put out his things for him. He dines with Mr. Archer, and off with him to a ball at the governor's house."

"Ah! I'm glad folks are showing him hospitality. And now, ladies, you had better go upstairs and prepare for dinner—you haven't much more than half an hour."

Mrs. Marks, flanked by a couple of maids, appeared to lead Charis and Sheila to their rooms, which they found replete with every luxury according to Canadian ideas, and they were much interested in examining the heating system, the water supply, and so on. When the bell sounded, they came downstairs together and found Strachan awaiting them in the hall. They were just about to repair to the dining-room, when the hum of a car was heard and a fine Daimler stopped at the gate. In it were some young men in flannels, one of whom jumped out, and, as his friends drove off, came running lightly up the steps, racquet in hand, and admitted himself with a latchkey.

As he stepped within the hall he halted abruptly, gazing upon what at first seemed to be an hallucination.

Then, as though he had touched in himself some lever which brought the whole of him immediately into subservience to his will, he came forward with a smile and gesture of greeting.

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"Hallo, George, this is admirably staged! How many of the old gang have you persuaded to cross the herring-pond? Have you got the others concealed upstairs?"

He shook hands with Mrs. Varick, then with his cousin, and last with his cousin's secretary. "Let me guess," said he, as he turned from his perfunctory shake of her hand to Strachan with a laugh, "you distrusted me so profoundly that you felt impelled to steal a march upon me? Well, I think the ledgers will bear examination—haven't had time yet to get far with my schemes of defalcation."

Strachan placed both hands upon the broad shoulders. "If they bear inspection as well as you do, I shan't complain! You look extremely well, Gilbert, and I hear the whole of this little old village has fallen for you."

"Who told you that yarn? Marks has been romancing. But I admit that, for your sake, folks are being very kind to me. Mrs. Varick, quite a scheme for you to come over! I think you will find a good deal to interest you in various ways. By the way, I expect you are all just going in to dinner, and I fear I mustn't linger now! Some men are calling for me in fifteen minutes' time, and we're going to a dance! Must get into my war-paint! Tell me the home news to-morrow."

He laughed, nodded, sprang up the stairs and disappeared.

"We-ell!" said Sheila, with one amused eye upon Strachan and one on the impassive countenance of

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Charis. "As that delightful man we met on board would have said, Gilbert is going it some, isn't he? He seems greatly altered."

"Canada's not quite like England," returned Strachan dryly.

* * * * *

Next morning the ladies remained upstairs, sleeping off their fatigue; and, as Strachan and Gilbert were both at the office all day, they did not meet the young man until the evening, when he condescended to dine with them, but made his apologies and left immediately after for an evening of bridge at the house of a man he had formerly known at Oxford.

Strachan suggested his taking a few days' holiday that he might escort the ladies about a bit. Gilbert replied that he should be delighted. But the expeditions planned did not come off, as the guests were snowed under by troops of visitors and showers of invitations.

There ensued a round of gaieties which threatened to become exhausting. Charis, clinging to her only rag of an excuse for her presence there, insisted upon taking her secretarial duties very seriously; and found the social round in addition somewhat fatiguing. Meanwhile, Gilbert and she never met but in company, and never spoke a word to one another beyond what the conventions demanded.

For the first few days, knowing the man as she did, Charis did not believe that he could keep it up. As time went by, and he maintained his pose seemingly without an effort, she began to realise that he

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meant the break to be final and complete; and to regret that she had ever come to Ontario. But for the consistent way in which he neglected and ignored her, one might have sworn that there could never have been anything between them.

Naturally, this is a game at which two can play; and it did not take long to make the girl proficient. Her neat avoidance of all chance of intercourse was soon as complete as his.

There was, however, a fact which worried and disturbed her. Pass her waking hours as diligently as she might in forgetting Gilbert, the moment sleep relaxed her will he passed into her dreams, and took, complete possession.

In these dreams he was as devoted as, in the world of fact, he was cold. So glowing, so exquisite were the hours they seemed to pass together, that she usually awoke penetrated utterly with the thrill of them; so that each morning the clash of their estrangement was a new shock.

She took refuge more and more in the whole-hearted hospitality and kindness offered her. Soon it was obvious that several of the young men who were in Gilbert's set found the Honourable Miss Osbourne (as, to her great amusement, they persisted in calling her on every possible occasion) very attractive indeed. Strachan watched the stream of bouquets and the be-ribboned boxes of sweets, and wondered if jealousy would break the stubborn back of the young man. He could not, however, detect any signs of this.

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Gilbert flirted a good deal; it seemed he could always now find plenty to say to girls.

"Who," thought Charis, "who that knew him in Streatwood — gauche, glum, tongue-tied — would guess this to be the same man? Cymon indeed; What a transformation!"

At last Strachan felt it time to take other steps. He saw signs of serious intention on the part of more than one young man; and also that Gilbert was not sufficiently guarded in his behaviour, and was awaking hopes for no other purpose than to punish Charis. He therefore announced that he was finding town too hot, and proposed that they should all go and camp at his shooting shack at Altabec.

Sheila was enchanted at the notion. She said she would far rather do this than rush around sight-seeing. Charis would not express any pleasure in an arrangement which must certainly tend to fling Gilbert and herself together. Gilbert, however, busily fitting a new string to the banjo he was learning to play, regretted politely that he had already accepted an invitation to stay with friends in a different direction, and doubted if he would be able to come to Altabec at all.

Upon this, Charis warmly said that she thought the camping-out idea quite delightful. She only lamented that her visit to Canada must terminate upon their return to the city, as her father wrote that he needed her. She hoped that Sheila would not cut short her own time on her account, as she could quite easily find an escort. "I suppose," said she to

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Strachan, "that I ought to book my passage at once, ought I not? The boats are so full!"

"If you mean that you really must go, I'll see to that for you," replied Strachan gravely; "but won't you wait until I have found another secretary?"

"Now that you have Mr. Brown, I should have thought you did not need one. But I'll look about for you, and do my best not to leave you stranded."

That night they all went to the theatre together. Upon their return, when the two girls had gone upstairs, Strachan called Gilbert into his smoking-den and flung himself into an easy chair. The young man was restive. He stood upon the hearth, drinking his lemon-squash, as if wishing to be gone.

"Sit down, you young fool!" said Strachan sternly; and, after a moment's hesitation his order was unwillingly obeyed.

"Gil"—after a prolonged puff at his pipe—"I want to say that I wish you to come to the camp at Altabec with us."

Gilbert clenched his fists and stared at the carpet.

"Then, George, I want to say, that I'll be hanged if I do. Haven't I borne enough? Haven't you plunged me into hell all these weeks? And have I so much as squeaked? I know the pull you have over me—I definitely don't want to quarrel with my bread and butter—but you must own there's a limit—and I've got there. I didn't think you'd be so infernally cruel, George."

Strachan sat forward. "In what respect do you charge me with infernal cruelty? Strong term!"

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"Not too strong to describe what you have done in bringing her here, when you knew well what the sight of her means—must mean—to me!"

"Were you born idiotic, Gilbert? Why do you suppose she is here?"

"I know that perfectly well, of course. Because you are going to marry her."

The slow dark colour flooded the sensitive face to the roots of the iron-grey hair.

"Dash your impertinence!" drawled Strachan. "You don't seriously think it. But this I'll say to you—and in dead earnest—that, if you don't mean to seize your chance——"

"My chance! I've chucked that away."

"You unutterable young fool, she's as proud as you are. She'll not easily forgive that letter you wrote. But—if you could persuade her to forgive it—well, there's a heaven waiting for you, my lad, which I can't help your chucking away if you want to, but which not one man in a thousand ever gets a chance to enter." Rising to his feet he stood impressively upright, frowning down upon Gilbert's flushed and perturbed face. "And I warn you"—slowly—"that, if you mean to let your paltry pride stand in the way of her happiness—why, then, I take a hand. If begging and praying and loving and serving will do it, I'll be your rival, as you have just now accused me of being. So don't say you haven't been warned."

There was a long, throbbing silence. Then the young man spoke, in a low voice as if to himself: "I daren't. I can't risk it again. The pain was too

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ghastly. It makes me a coward. . . . Sometimes I think I hate her, when she sweeps past me as if I were not there. . . . Why, she keeps her very eyes from resting on me, even by accident! And you ask me to go again and offer her my heart to tear. . . .

"You shall have something more than your heart to offer this time, Gil," said his cousin quaintly, "though I admit the article in question seems to be of more value than I at first supposed. However, you can now offer her a position she need not despise. I am going to take you into partnership. I am going to make an eldest son of you. And in return I make but one solitary condition—that you drop the name of Brown, and adopt that of Strachan by deed poll."

Gilbert lifted his ravaged face, and his mouth quivered. "George—you mean that?"

"I mean it. I shall give your mother a legacy, and provide an ample annuity for the Nicholsons. The rest is for you and Charis."

Suddenly Gil sprang up. "She knows this? You have told her your intentions?"

Strachan smiled slowly. "What do *you* think? No, she knows nothing of it, and cares less. She herself is no great match, now that the little brother has arrived; his lordship will be thankful to be let off the necessity of providing a large marriage portion. And, after all, there will be only one life between your heirs and the Ringland property."

"George," pleaded Gilbert shakily, "have you

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reason to suppose—any real ground for suggesting—that she cares?”

“Personal observation,” was the cautious reply. “She is here. I go by that.”

Said Gilbert, after long silence: “I can’t thank you. I can’t even fix my mind on what you’ve just told me. I’m only conscious of the hope—the thing that’s to make or break me. Will you do something for me? To give me a chance? Let her continue to think that I’m not coming to Altabec. Let me turn up unexpectedly, when you’ve been there two or three days. Play up to me—arrange the stage a bit.”

“I get you, Gil,” was the calm rejoinder.

Altabec is the most charming of shacks, with a big central living-room, round which the bedrooms are grouped. A covered passage on one side leads to the bath building, and a similar one opposite to the kitchens.

In other moods Charis would have loved the place. But now it had no charm. A couple of days in the solitary wilds gave her, far more poignantly than in Ontario, the sense of being forsaken. Sheila was learning to paddle a Canadian canoe on the picturesque sheet of water near which the shack stood. Strachan was teaching her, and this left Charis lonely for many hours at a time.

On a golden afternoon of sunshine and warm air she lay alone in the hammock under the veranda. All the elements for comfort and luxury were there;

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she was surrounded by beauty; and its only effect seemed to be to emphasise her unhappiness.

Since Gilbert's blunt refusal to join the camping party, she had realised that all she had to do was to collect the remnants of her pride, and make them hold together until she could leave this country of grief and humiliation. She had slept badly the previous night, and presently the seduction of the afternoon peace overcame the gloom of her thoughts, and she drifted into sleep. As usual—"with the first dream that comes with the first sleep"—she was with Gilbert, and all was well. She dreamed that he was there, with her—that she was no longer alone—and that they were talking with the ease and intimacy of perfect harmony. "We can never quarrel any more," she thought he said. And she replied: "No, for now we understand everything, don't we?"

She spoke the last words aloud, and the sound of her own voice awoke her.

She opened her eyes upon Gilbert—Gilbert in the attire suitable for the backwoods—Gilbert so completely part of the picture that for a few seconds she believed herself still dreaming, and smiled up from her heart into his. Then with a shock she realised that she was awake—that he was no longer part of the dream—that he looked rather mischievous, and that he was swinging the hammock gently to and fro.

"Hushaby, Baby," he crooned; and——

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"What are you doing? Stop swinging me about!" cried she, struggling up on her elbow.

"That all the greeting you have for a fellow who has been travelling thirty hours without a break to get here?"

"You needn't have hurried so. You'll have to wait quite a long time. Sheila's out on the water, and won't be in before dark."

"I can live without Mrs. Varick, thank you!"

"I suppose you will want some food, and so on. Kindly stand away, and let me get out of this thing!"

Gilbert stooped and gathered her into his arms to lift her to the ground. So taken by surprise was she that she was imprudent enough to struggle, and when she did that he held her tight—tight.

"No use," said he. "I shan't put you down until I want to. There's nobody about. The servants are in the kitchens, and I have you all to myself. So if I let you go, it will be on my own terms."

"Terms! *Your* terms forsooth!" Her voice, which should have been infuriated, sounded faint and shaky. "And pray, what are your terms?"

"Unconditional surrender," he whispered.

"Mr. Brown, you forget yourself!"

"I do. I can remember nothing but you. Cruel wretch that you are—coming out here to gloat over me! How long did you suppose I was going to stand it?"

"I—I wondered."

"Oh! So you did wonder?"

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"Well, just now and again I did. . . . Oh, Gil, Gil, how hateful you have been to me!"

"I'll make up for that. I've had enough of being humble—one only gets trampled on. For the future I am going to be very kind . . . and condescending . . . I'm going to forgive you, and take you on again, if you're very good."

"Forgive me, indeed! You would be far better occupied if you went on your knees to beg *me* to forgive *you*!"

"My knees are better occupied. The Desire of my Life is enthroned thereon." And suddenly his voice changed to the note she loved and dreaded—the voice that had conquered her in the inn by Thirlmere. "But my heart is kneeling to you, oh Beloved—is asking for a sign that this isn't a delirious dream. I want to be sure that I have really come to the door of Heaven, and that it has opened to me at last."

"It might have opened sooner had you just taken the trouble to knock."

"I jolly well wasn't going to risk another rebuff."

"Neither was I! Then, what made you?"

"What made me dare to come here to-day? George, of course! He's a bit magnificent, old George. He gave me the right to come, by telling me that the £ s. d. part was his affair."

"He's wonderful!" she murmured, with remorseful tenderness.

Her lover was not yet in a state to bear that note in her voice for any other man.

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"Never mind Strachan, nor £ s. d., nor any other old thing," he whispered. "Nothing in all the world matters but you—just you and me! Let's get out of sight before the others turn up—let's be off into the woods. I've been hanging about among the trees for the past half-hour, waiting to see if you would go to sleep, and I've discovered a nook over there by a waterfall—a seat just made for two. Come, Iphigenia, come away with your shepherd lad. . . . Or must I carry you?"

There were two who watched, from a boat far out upon the little lake, the approach of the besieger; and who witnessed, after quite a short parley at the gates, the submissive departure of the vanquished. The lovers slowly disappeared among the great fir-trees, moving so amicably, so evidently in perfect agreement, as to leave no doubt of the success of the surprise attack.

"The barriers," said George Strachan drearily, "must have gone down with a run."

The soft eyes of Sheila Varick were dim with pity for his pain. In the past few weeks he had aged perceptibly. Recalling him as he had been when they started upon their motor tour in such hilarity and glad anticipation, she thought he looked ten years older.

She could, however, offer only unspoken sympathy; in such a case, what is there to be said?

She hoped and believed that after a while this man might come to love as a daughter the creature who had so bewitched him; but as yet such a sug-

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gestion would not only be of no comfort, but **might** actually increase the bitterness of defeat.

For when a man of George Strachan's **age and** temperament falls in love, the malady is, alas ! **quite** likely to prove incurable.

THE END

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